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THE MAN FOR THE JOB

By the same Author

THE NATURE OF MODERN WARFARE
ORDEAL BY BATTLE

THE MAN FOR THE JOB

A Story for Commissars

by

CYRIL FALLS

. . . un jeune garçon à qui la nature avait donné les mœurs les plus douces. Sa physionomie annonçait son âme. Il avait le jugement assez droit, avec l'esprit le plus simple; c'est, je crois, pour cette raison qu'on le nommait Candide . . . il trouvait Mademoiselle Cunégonde extrêmement belle . . .

. . . fut nommé Gouverneur du Chusistan, avec un pouvoir absolu: on le décora d'un bonnet fourré, ce qui est une grande marque de distinction en Perse.



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THIS BOOK IS PRODUCED IN
COMPLETE CONFORMITY WITH THE
AUTHORIZED ECONOMY STANDARDS

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

*To all the Planners, professional and
amateur, this book is dedicated by
their obliged, obedient, admiring, and
entertained Servant*

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PREFATORY NOTE

ALL the characters in this book are imaginary. To be strictly accurate, I ought to add "with the exception of four of whom there is but passing mention". If there is mention of a prime minister in 1906 who is described as "a forward-looking Scottish Radical", and of a junior minister whose Christian name is "Winston"; if a few years later there is a chancellor of the exchequer whose Christian name is "Davy"—then I cannot pretend that these great figures are wholly the product of my imagination. If in the Second World War there appears for one brief moment a British commander-in-chief called General Lysander, it would be idle for me to suggest that I had no real figure in mind. But no character who takes any part in the plot is based upon any real personage, living or dead. Every one of these is imaginary.

I might say as much for the scenes described. There would have been no objection to my reproducing mere scenes and situations. But a writer, even a writer of fiction, even a writer of satirical fiction, has to take some account of probabilities. Had I reproduced real scenes from the interior of war-time ministries they would not have been believed because they are unbelievable. I dare not strain the credulity or the sense of probability of readers by giving them the real thing, so, though occasionally some fragment of an original situation may have survived, I have toned down the farcical and excised the unseemly. I earnestly hope that no one will believe there is any exaggeration here. The contrary is the case.

CHAPTER I

MONOBELIUM FOR VICTORY

THOSE who have arrived at the human era vaguely known as middle-age will remember the interest caused by the discovery of the new mineral, afterwards called monobelium. It was found in Rutland, of all counties, on land which had been pasture from time immemorial, and the general geological nature of which made its discovery appear so freakish. And if its location was odd, so also was its limitation. A series of borings ascertained the fact that, over an area of roughly a square mile but more or less circular in shape, the veins were so close and so thick as to form something in the nature of a cone of the precious stuff, but that, though a number of veins extended outside it, like spokes or radii prolonged beyond the circumference of a circle, they were thin and poor and speedily petered out altogether. There it was, compact and isolated and alone of its kind. It had kindred, found in Turkey, in Siberia, and in the United States, but they were not quite the same thing. Nor were any of them quite so effective for the purpose for which they were employed, the hardening of steel.

The discovery gave a fillip to the heavy industries of this kingdom, which had recently been somewhat wilted by the blast of outside competition. The differences between monobelium and its rivals was small, but they were definite. The life of a precision tool made from monobelium steel was estimated to be $12\frac{1}{2}$ per cent longer

than one turned out by the Germans from polycrastium. For some other purposes monobelium gave not only that much longer life but also a better performance all through, which amounted to quite 10 per cent. "Monobelium is best and British", the slogan which became so familiar, was justified.

The country profited from monobelium, but in accordance with the backward sentiments of the first decade of this century it allowed one man to profit to an extent which would never have been countenanced in these more enlightened days. The mine was discovered on the land of a young squire named John Carstairs, and he proceeded to dig and market the stuff without anyone saying him nay. It sounds incredible, but it is a fact that monobelium was never nationalized. It was all the more extraordinary because, the very year after its discovery, 1905, a Liberal Government, burning with zeal for reform, assumed office. Some of the younger and more public-spirited of the ministers might have interfered, but the Prime Minister was, if the truth be told, archaic, not to say reactionary, in such matters, though he had the reputation of a forward-looking Scottish Radical.

"No, Winston," he replied to some tentative inquiries, "I don't see the good of interfering. The man is working it well and he isn't overcharging. He can't take it away, so we can always put our hands on it if we want it. They say the veins will last a hundred years at least at the present rate of consumption. And if he makes too much money no doubt our Chancellor will think out ways of relieving him of a good deal of it. I know nationalization is the thing in theory, but it's astonishing when you put a prosperous concern into the hands of a Government department how soon it begins to lose money. At all events let's wait till the fellow has finished his organization

and brought it up to its best before we take over. I know he's a Tory, but even that doesn't seem to be conclusive reason for action." All of which shows that the Prime Minister had distinctly bourgeois tendencies.

The calls of the Chancellor, and still more of his successor, upon the purse of John Carstairs indeed seemed heavy in those days, though they were but light whips by comparison with the scorpions launched by the modern holders of the office. When, however, a few years later, John Carstairs, in the capacity of Chairman of his local Conservative Association, ventured to make a speech at Uppingham in favour of the veto of the House of Lords, a question much agitating the public mind, the then Chancellor's silver tongue duly chastised the monobelium monopoly. There is a passage in the famous Bethnal Green Speech which, since it has been overshadowed in the public memory by more momentous parts of that oration, may fitly be quoted here.

"And there's another of them about whom I have a word to say. (*Cheers and cries of, Give it to 'em, Davy!*) He's not a peer yet, not a member of that noble house, but he lives in hopes, look you. (*Laughter*) He's licking his chops, and the saliva is running down his chin. (*Laughter*) He's made a good start by marrying an earl's daughter, and he dreams about the coronet each night. Yes, indeed, and he says we do not want a Welsh attorney digging into this. But I say, 'What is Mr. John Carstairs digging into?' It is the soil of England. Because his ancestors stole a monastery and because he was pupped the first of the litter, he owns a big piece of the soil of England—and everything under it, however far you go. If the fires of hell in the middle could be used commercially, John Carstairs, and all the others like John Carstairs, would own them too. (*Cheers and laughter*) But he doesn't like

Welsh attorneys interfering. But I tell Mr. Carstairs that he can't keep this one out. (*Loud cheers*)"

However, hard words break no bones, and no steps were taken against the Carstairs monobelium monopoly, which continued to flourish. Incidentally, John Carstairs had no desire for a peerage, but it is to be feared that his reason for despising it was not democratic common sense so much as aristocratic pride. He thought Carstairs of Carstairs Hall good enough without a handle to his name.

The Carstairs were certainly old stock. It might have been said of them, as was said by Jane Austen of the Dashwoods, that "their estate was large, and . . . for many generations they had lived in so respectable a manner as to engage the general good opinion of their surrounding acquaintance". Of late years the squirearchy had declined in prosperity, and the Carstairs had not escaped the general fate. Their heads were above water, but it was uncomfortably near their chins. Nothing can be more certain that, in default of some lucky windfall such as a great heiress—and the heiresses, or their mothers, were all after titles in those days—they would eventually have passed out of the ranks of the landed gentry but for monobelium.

In 1905, when the great discovery was made, John Carstairs was four-and-twenty and had just lost his father. He was also vigorous and enterprising. It would have been easy and lucrative to sell the property or large interests in it. Half the City of London was hanging round hopefully, and if the Chancellor of the Exchequer had said that the saliva was running down *their* chins, his figure of speech would have been apt. They warned that obstinate young man of the risks he ran without experience and capital—how earnestly did they warn him! He would not listen. He started the thing himself, and he continued

to run it, only bringing in his two sons as partners as each left Cambridge. When limited companies became more fashionable he obstinately refused to form one, though again the City, in which he was by now a prominent figure, rallied round and pointed out that such a step would be to his pecuniary advantage. "Dam' pig-headed blighter!" said his friend Benny Isaacs after arguing in vain. "Funny thing, though, he's a first-class business man."

To-day John Carstairs had formed the limited company, but kept it very much in the family. He was sixty-one, rosy-gilled and with the look of a man who knew the difference between a bottle of port and one of Burgundy, but still hale, vigorous, and alert. He needed to be; for the help he had received from his two clever sons was no longer available. Alan, the elder, had fallen near Ypres, just after leading a counter-attack of orderlies, clerks, cooks, and batmen which had mended a small but dangerous hole in Gort's front. His last words, reported with some misgiving by a brother officer, were often in his father's mind. They were: "Well done the Odds and Sods!" Rupert was a captain in the Border Guards, still in England.

Fortunately, almost the entire output of monobelium was now going directly through the Ministry of Armaments and Supply to factories engaged in the production of war material. This meant that both correspondence and anxieties were reduced, though it invariably happened that if Mr. Plumpton, the official who dealt with Carstairs and Sons, was out or in conference—and two hours' conference added to two hours' lunch took up a large proportion of his day—Carstairs was put on to someone who had never heard of monobelium.

"Yes, of course," a dulcet voice would say over the telephone, "I know all the general lines of the business,

but Mr. Plumpton has all the details and I think it might only delay matters if I butted into his back-yard. I'll see he rings you up directly he gets back to his room. Your name's Cartwright, isn't it. Oh, I *beg* your pardon, Carstairs, of course. C-a-r-s-t-a-i-r-s. Well, you can rely on me. Good-bye, Mr. Cartwright."

He could recall one occasion on which the voice had evidently forgotten to hang up the receiver and spoken to someone in the room while still holding it in his hand. John Carstairs had listened with interest to the following:

"Seems to be some crazy ass who's trying to sell us a *monowheel*. Us, a monowheel, I ask you! The way these creatures waste time! I thought of putting him on to the Bicycles Department of the Ministry of Transportation, but Horsely's sister's a friend of mine and I don't want to get into his bad books by turning a lunatic on to him. And anyhow he seems to know Plumpton, so let him deal with the monowheel when he gets back."

However, when Mr. Plumpton was there he generally seemed to know what he wanted, or rather what he had been told by someone else was wanted. So, after correcting his arithmetic, which frequently got the output of monobelium wrong, Carstairs could do his business quickly enough. His head clerk was experienced and reliable, though aged and rather slow. His staff, despite the call-up, was surprisingly efficient. The mine manager was a jewel, and most fortunately a mature jewel, so that there seemed no danger of his being taken away unless someone in the Ministry of Employment had a brain-storm. Altogether, things might have been worse.

Then there was Evelyn, who represented a temporary asset of a certain value. On the afternoon which marks the opening of this narrative business was unusually slack, and John Carstairs had been reviewing his position on the

lines indicated above. Having got as far as this, he naturally turned his thoughts to his young kinsman. Evelyn Allardyce was the son of his first cousin, a lady who had allied the blood of the Carstairs to the almost equally distinguished liquid in the veins of the Allardyces but was nevertheless in the category of poor relations. Evelyn had been doing something vague and unsatisfactory in the City when John had picked him up and put him into Alan's room to learn the business, secretly determining that if he proved to have good stuff in him he might qualify for a junior partnership.

John Carstairs had not even now, after observation extending over two years of peace and upwards of two years of war, made up his mind about Evelyn. He was very good-looking and attractive, which is not a disadvantage even in the City. With fair hair, rosy cheeks, and candid blue eyes, he looked much younger than his twenty-eight years. He had learnt all that an intellect not below the average could absorb of the business. Since the outbreak of war more work had naturally come his way, but even before it he had often enough had to take the place of Alan Carstairs, since it must be confessed that the claims of polo, grouse, and foxes had withdrawn Alan from Moorgate for an appreciable part of the year. (Why own a monopoly unless you can get some fun out of it?) Evelyn had made no serious mistakes. He had not been remiss. He was not idle, loquacious, vicious, or stupid.

And yet John Carstairs had hesitated about the partnership and had continued to do so even after Alan had been killed in Flanders. Was there not a certain absence of positive qualities in that engaging personality? Was there something like a blank behind those limpid blue eyes which faced the world so widely opened and yet so modestly? He could not be sure. He was inclined to

believe that Evelyn was a virgin page. Something of interest might be written thereupon in the future, but he felt impatient about the delay. It did not appear that anyone had the right to remain a virgin page at the age of twenty-eight. Being a frivolous old man in some ways, he chuckled at his own unspoken pun. At all events, he thought, the partnership could now wait, as the Army was likely to claim Evelyn.

The telephone bell interrupted these reflections. He picked up the receiver and heard the important voice of Plumpton bidding him good afternoon. Compliments having been exchanged, the deputy director went on:

"First of all I want to say that there are no complaints, no—er—complaints, against your business in what I'm going to say next. You have done your side of the transactions, of the—er—transactions, entirely to the satisfaction of myself, and, I may add, yes, I think I may safely add, of the Minister." He assumed that ritual cadence in which deputy directors speak of their ministers—not exactly that of the priest speaking of his god in the temple, but perhaps that in which he might speak of him after dinner and in his slippers. Carstairs murmured into the mouthpiece that this was very handsome on the part of Plumpton.

"Any weaknesses there have been, have been on our side," went on the voice, now restored to its normal but still oracular level.

"Oh, my dear Plumpton, don't—"

"I was not alluding to weaknesses in my own—er—person. Ha-ha-ha! I was just indicating that the many calls upon my time make it unsatisfactory that I should deal with this important affair solely myself with only—er—assistance of a secretarial or clerical character."

"Well, I believe in delegation myself," said Carstairs.

"Delegate, my dear Plumpton, delegate. Your time's very valuable to the country."

"Well, I'm sure I hope so," answered the deputy director, a touch of asperity in his voice, as though he fancied there had been the gentlest pull at his leg. "And as for delegating, for—er—delegation, or rather for delegating, that's precisely what I want to do, and why I come to you. The—er—civil servant is sometimes a little slow in picking up technical knowledge"—Plumpton had been a barrister specializing in patents—"and in any case the good ones have found their—er—niches."

"Niches is the word," said Carstairs.

"Er—I was just wondering whether it was or not. But the point is I want to appoint a man who knows your business from A to Z and will constitute in himself a sort of—er—one-man department to deal directly with you."

"There isn't such a man."

"I think there is, one, and it's about him I'm speaking. Not to beat about the bush further, I, and I may add the—er—Minister, yes, I may safely add the Minister, want you to let us have young Allardyce."

"But—my hat, I never thought of that! But, I say, Plumpton, you know, he's been de-reserved and he's just going to be called up. He was in the Army early on for a bit. He and I both felt that he could be spared at a pinch."

"Then he shall be re-reserved, yes, re-reserved. I think I can guarantee that. This is a highly important appointment."

"Well of course if you put it like that and he himself—"

"I must add that I've taken the—er—liberty, if you can call it that, of sounding him on the subject. Perhaps sounding isn't the right word; it was more of an—er—

inspection, yes, an inspection. You see, I hardly knew him except to talk to on the telephone."

"Anyway you didn't find him unwilling."

"I found him interested. I hope you have no objection to my not approaching you first. If I'd found him—er—unsatisfactory I should have said nothing about it. But he appeared suitable."

"No, I've no objection. I'll have a talk with him myself. Meanwhile how soon do you want him?"

"Let's say the first of next month if everything can be fixed up satisfactorily. I'll have him round here shortly for a talk with the Establishment Officer on the subject of terms. I must say, Carstairs, I'm deeply grateful for your attitude on this matter."

"Oh, that's all right. Doing one's bit and all that, you know. Nothing else to-day? Right. Well good-bye, Plumpton." He hung up the receiver with the reflection that the loss of Evelyn would entail longer hours for himself but that there would be some compensation in the presence at the Ministry of one other man who would not confuse monobelium with a monowheel on the telephone. Then he rang for his expensive office-boy and bade him summon Mr. Allardyce. Evelyn came in looking pinker than ever, but Carstairs decided that this was not due to embarrassment.

"Well, Evelyn," he began, "did Plumpton give you a very good luncheon?"

"It was very good indeed," said Evelyn. "Claridges," he added.

"Claridges? Ah, that sounds as if he really did want you at the Ministry. Well, I hear we're going to lose you for the duration."

"I needn't tell you, sir, that I've made no arrangement one way or the other. It's entirely a matter for you."

"My dear Evelyn, if they want you, of course you must go. I shall miss your help, but personally I expect I shall see as much of you as ever, and it will be useful to have you there. There are a lot of things we shall have to go through before you go, but there'll be plenty of time for that. For instance—"

He took a file marked "confidential" from a drawer and flicked through the pages.

"Percentage of output in excess of August, 1939. January, 1941, 21.9 per cent; February, 22.3 per cent; March, 9.3 per cent—that was the bomb, of course; April, 15.4 per cent; May ought to be back again to normal. I've never sent these figures to the Ministry, but you must take copies. Perhaps you could put pressure on to get another boring plant. That ought to bring us up to 33 per cent. But they've been talking about it for the last year. And there are a lot of other things."

"Yes, sir, of course."

Evelyn was a little *distract*. His mind kept harking back to the scene at Claridges, to the soft carpets, the confidential waiters, the bottle of Burgundy, above all the arrogant, self-assured, well-dressed, and well-made-up women, the bustle, the talk, the air of knowingness. He had never been to Claridges before. John Carstairs was extremely rich and hospitable, but he was not interested in hotels. When he had entertained Evelyn it had been at the Turf or the Marlborough, where there was quiet, sombre luxury and good cooking but not such light and charm as still persisted at Claridges after nearly two years of war. And then the women, those sylphs and sirens! One of them, lunching with a French officer, had looked his way twice and set his pulses racing.

And then old Plumpton's table talk. "Opportunity for a good man." "Never know what may turn up." "Not

on any account less than a thousand a year", which was exciting for a young man whose salary had only recently been raised to seven hundred and fifty and who found that war prices and income tax had swallowed up a great deal more than the increase. Perhaps occasionally, just occasionally, he might be able to afford a meal at Claridges, and—he looked towards the woman with the French officer, but she was now giving all her attention to her companion, laughing over some joke. Well, anyhow, it was all very exciting. Once more, guiltily, he started to listen to what his old cousin was saying.

CHAPTER II

FOOT IN THE STIRRUP

ELYLYN sat in the room of the Establishment Officer facing the Establishment Officer himself. That gentleman was remarkably lean and somewhat untidy in his person. A cruel sun streaming in revealed that his black coat was spotted with gravy. Yet he was not without some vanity; for his very thin hair was parted just over his left ear and carefully plastered over a bald head to make what there was of it go as far as possible. His voice was harsh, but his expression was pleasant, almost benignant.

"You come in under the heading of 'specialist', Mr. Allardyce," he said. "It would not be right or indeed possible to ask one of your knowledge and experience to start as Assistant Principal, which is the rank that would normally be given to one of your age. Your emoluments,

with war bonus, will amount to a little short of eleven hundred pounds per annum——”

Evelyn drew a sharp breath, and the Establishment Officer vetoed all possible protests with a wave of his arm.

“Perhaps you are disappointed, Mr. Allardyce, but I am not empowered to allow you more. I hope it’s not a sacrifice, but if so we have all to make sacrifices on occasion in these days.”

“No, I assure you it’s not a sacrifice,” said Evelyn.

“I am glad to hear it. Eleven hundred pounds, paid into your account monthly, with income tax deducted at source. If you will please sign here on this line.”

Evelyn signed.

“Then, your contract. The usual thing. Terminable, as you are not an established civil servant, by so many month’s notice on either side. But that arrangement is itself likely to be terminable. For your private information I may inform you that you are likely to be frozen——” He put so fierce an emphasis upon the word that Evelyn started. “A figure of speech,” went on the Establishment Officer with a smile. “I mean that you will probably not be able to give up your post without very good cause and the permission of the Ministry of Employment. Everyone will presently be frozen, Mr. Allardyce.”

Evelyn did not reply, but supposed that if they all froze together it would be more endurable.

“Just look through the contract. It’s very short and on the lines which have been fixed for such cases as yours. Nothing unpleasant about it—secrecy, of course, and all that, even to the extent of not giving your own firm any information not necessary to the conduct of government business. That all right? If you will please sign here on this line.”

Evelyn signed.

"One more matter which comes into my province," said the Establishment Officer. "You will of course require secretarial assistance, and it's desirable that you should have someone who knows the ropes here. It will save your time and ours too. Fortunately there are two ladies who have worked with Mr. Plumpton in that capacity, and he's prepared to let you have either of them. There Miss Mackay, who has the great advantage of being over the age limit which the Ministry of Employment is likely to impose in the future and so may be considered a permanency. She's very experienced. Before she came to Mr. Plumpton she'd been with Wilson, but he was called up and taken prisoner by the Italians, poor chap."

"And the other?"

"Miss MacNutt. She's had a great deal of experience too. She was with Prendergast."

"And what happened to Prendergast?"

"Oh, he was promoted and transferred to the Ministry of Blockade."

"I think I'd rather have Miss MacNutt," said Evelyn.

"Well, just as you please. I own," went on the Establishment Officer, "if I were in your place I might make the same choice. In fact I had thought——" but he brushed aside the thought, whatever it was, with another wave of his arm.

"Well, except as regards age, I can't judge why you prefer her, as I haven't seen either," said Evelyn.

"You may be able to judge when you have seen them," said the Establishment Officer. "But of course there is this possible snag. Miss MacNutt *might* be called up."

"Couldn't Miss MacNutt be frozen?"

The Establishment Officer reflected for a moment. "I

don't think I can give an opinion on that point," he said finally. "But you can see them now," he went on. "I'll take you to your room and send them round to you."

"Oh, but you really mustn't bother!" said Evelyn. "Just tell me the number. I can find my way."

"Oh, no, I'll take you up. I'd just like to see that everything's all right. The Office Keeper was told to have it cleared and cleaned up for you. Come along, it's on the next floor just above this."

They went up in a swift and silent lift, for this was a new building. The Establishment Officer indicated a door marked 97A and stated that there Evelyn's secretary, whether Miss Mackay or Miss MacNutt, would be accommodated. Then he threw open the next door, marked 97, and ushered Evelyn into the room which was to be his.

It was pleasant and clean, and, like the Establishment Officer's room below, received the afternoon sun. It was also carpeted. Carpets, the Establishment Officer explained, went by seniority. Above a certain grade, a carpet; below that grade, no carpet. There had, he went on, been no ruling on the subject of specialists such as Evelyn, and as matters were going that class would undoubtedly not be issued with carpets in the future. But as the room had previously been occupied by an Assistant Secretary, unquestionably entitled to a fairly high-grade carpet by right of rank and office, and this carpet was not big enough for the room to which he had been transferred, it had been decided that Evelyn might be considered as of the standing of carpet-bearers.

He murmured his acknowledgments, but he was even more taken by the steel knee-hole writing-table, which promised easy-running drawers, always a delight to him. For the rest, he noted that the room was slightly larger

and much cleaner and lighter than that which he had occupied in the City. There was little furniture: apart from the desk only a steel cupboard, a swivel chair for himself, an armchair, presumably for visitors, and one other chair. The carpet was soft to the tread. He felt that he might have been destined to start work next morning in less agreeable surroundings. But first he had to face an ordeal which somewhat scared him, to interview the ladies, one of whom was to share his labours and direct his tottering steps until he had found his feet.

After the Establishment Officer had left him he sat down at the desk which was to be his to-morrow and tried to gather strength from its important appearance. But a few minutes' waiting did not add to his courage. He told himself angrily that he was not going to waste his time. After all, he was not beginning work till to-morrow. He could see the ladies then. Now he would go, not because he was afraid of them—oh, dear no—but because he objected to being put upon. Anyhow, he thought, they would probably trot the elder one, Miss Mackay, in first. But if he was going he had better go quickly or he might be caught. He picked up his hat and moved towards the door. The door opened.

It was not Miss Mackay. Most assuredly it was not Miss Mackay. So they had trotted the young one in first after all. Beyond that fact Evelyn had no clear impressions. All else was a blur. Honey-coloured hair, dark eyes, cream-like skin, blazing red mouth, slim figure but nevertheless contours which shamed the prevailing austerity—he was dazed; he was confused; he was dumb.

"You're Mr. Allardyce? I've been sent round to see you. I suppose I'm on inspection. Bit embrarassing, isn't it?" she went on, while Evelyn reflected that it was for

him, but that she showed no sign of any such frailty. He felt like a diver whose head has just emerged from a long period under water, not our chilly northern water but the blue warmth of the Mediterranean, though breathing all the same. He had not yet recovered the power of speech. Miss MacNutt's air was business-like, but she appeared to be affected by some secret amusement, not apparent enough to be in any way offensive, perhaps largely created by Evelyn's imagination, but he thought faintly indicated.

"It's rather hard to decide what one says and does on these occasions," she remarked. "I don't expect you want me to go through my list of accomplishments. They sound rather bogus, so perhaps all I need say is that I believe I can organize and make things run smoothly."

"I'm sure you can," said Evelyn fervently. "Would you like to work with me?"

"Am I called on to answer that question?" asked Miss MacNutt, now showing more definite signs of amusement. "I think not. It's you who have to say whether you want to take me on. You see, I'm just the competent secretarial machine, ready to work where I'm put. I don't mind owning that there are some places I'd rather be put in than others, but I leave my business affairs entirely in the hands of Fate and the Ministry. And which is the odder I *don't* know. But I mustn't keep you too long. You were just going when I came in, weren't you? Beside, you haven't yet inspected Miss Mackay."

"I'm not sure I need see Miss Mackay," said Evelyn.

"I expect it would be wiser. But that's for you to judge. I can only presume if you don't that you've already made up your mind that as a competent secretarial machine I shall fill the bill. I hope you've made no mistake. It's quick work on your part. But perhaps that's because you

are very prompt and decisive in business." There could be no doubt now that Miss MacNutt was amused.

"I say, do sit down," said Evelyn, "and then I can."

She sat down, crossing one shapely leg over the other to Evelyn's further discomfiture. He handed her a cigarette and lit it for her.

"But I expect you've got an appointment, haven't you," she said. "Please don't let me keep you."

"No, I haven't got an appointment, at least not one that matters," said Evelyn, "and I don't feel in quite such a hurry to go as I did."

Miss MacNutt looked at him sharply. Was he beginning to be fresh? Was he what was known as a fast worker? But the candour of his blue eyes was impenetrable and inexplicable. She decided there and then that even if he changed his mind about Miss Mackay—who in point of fact was a handsome, attractive, and amusing woman at what Miss MacNutt considered a dangerous age where young men were concerned—he should not see her. She should be looked for if he desired it, but she should not be found. She wondered if her new chief ever spoke more than one sentence at a time. But she also discovered that she did not object to sitting in the same room with him in silence for a full minute. And this for her was a novel experience.

"If you're really not so terribly busy," she ventured at length, "it wouldn't be a bad thing if we spent a few minutes getting better acquainted. It would be a good start for to-morrow, don't you think?"

Evelyn replied that he thought it would be perfectly splendid, but suggested that he might be taking her from her work.

"As a matter of fact," she replied, "you've struck a lucky day. This is the idlest day of the year in the

Ministry. I might say it's the idlest day of the year in the whole Civil Service."

Evelyn's eyebrows framed an interrogation.

"It's the day of the Birthday Honours. Everyone's hard at work, but on private affairs. Everyone's writing letters congratulating his friends who've got anything from a K.C.B. down to an M.B.E. Some of them are on the phone on the same job, congratulating or answering congratulations. They get the list and mark the names in red pencil; then they go straight through them. It's a full day's work for everyone, and as for the real old hands, they may have to carry forward some of it to to-morrow. You see, if they don't congratulate their friends now, they won't get congratulated when their turn comes round. And a nice tactful letter now may help to bring their turn round a bit quicker. There's nothing like keeping your name in view."

"I suppose," said Evelyn wistfully, "I'm too young and unimportant to hope for such things."

"That depends on what you make of this job. There's no knowing. The only thing I was going to suggest is that you should just occasionally take a word of advice from me. I may not be a genius, but I do know the ropes round here. And if you're not too proud to listen now and then I might be able to help. You can tell me to stop if I talk too much."

Evelyn assured her that he was most unlikely to do anything of the sort and that he would be grateful for advice. She then remarked that, for a start, it would be well to write a note to Mr. Plumpton, who had been awarded the C.B. He was believed, she said, to have expected something a degree higher, so that it was all the more necessary to congratulate him on what he had got. She indicated the note-paper, all ready in one of the smooth-

sliding steel drawers. Evelyn took a sheet, pulled out his fountain pen—and stared at the ceiling for inspiration. Then he stared at her for inspiration, but it did not come, at least not in the form of a letter to Mr. Plumpton. Then her agreeable voice began to dictate slowly:

“Dear Mr. Plumpton—At the moment of taking up my new work at the Ministry it gives me particular pleasure to be able to felicitate you upon the well-merited honour of which you have just been the recipient stop In my previous position I have had a favourable opportunity for realizing how important your work has been in connection with the vital product of monobelium stop I trust that I shall be able in some measure to be of service to you comma and through you to the national war effort stop In this regard comma I can only say that I will do my best stop Yours sincerely comma”

“Well, what’s gone wrong? Isn’t it all right?”

“Oh, it’s splendid. But isn’t the language just a little comma shall I say comma formal dash not to say turgid?”

“Now look here, am I writing this letter or are you?”

“Well, I’m doing the physical part of it, but obviously you’re really doing the writing.”

“And do I look like a donkey braying for the mere pleasure of the thing?”

“You certainly don’t.”

“And have you ever met anything more formal and turgid than Plumpton?”

“I never have.”

“Then this is the stuff to give him. Now sign it.”

Evelyn signed.

“Now just write on the envelope ‘J. R. H. Plumpton, Esq., K.C., C.B.’, and I’ll see that it’s put on his desk.”

"But, strictly speaking he's not a C.B. yet. He hasn't got it."

"I foresee," said Miss MacNutt with a sigh, "that you are going to be a bit difficult to help. What really matters is that he'll like it. If it's wrong he'll get a first-class kick out of correcting you when he meets you, and even if he's too polite for that he'll get a kick out of realizing that he could have corrected you and that his knowledge of the Companionship is much greater than yours."

"I see," said Evelyn humbly, and wrote as he had been bidden.

"Quite honestly," went on Miss MacNutt, "you can trust my judgment in routine matters. Naturally, when it's a question of policy I leave it to you—sometimes," she added mentally—"but I do know the ropes and I'm not a fool. I do hope, Evelyn, you'll begin with that assumption."

"Er—oh yes, of course," said the startled Evelyn.

"Gosh, that sounded a bit fresh," said Miss MacNutt with elaborate unconcern, "but I was just going to say that as we're going to be sort of kennel companions it's easier, I mean, Christian names, don't you think? Becoming very fashionable in the war-time Civil Service."

Evelyn replied that it was an excellent idea, and looked as though he meant it. She waited for him to ask her for her name, but he showed no sign of doing so. She was beginning to realize that initiative was not his strong point—in one direction at all events. And her experience was to the effect that the go-getters with women were generally the go-getters in business too. And about her own name she always felt an initial embarrassment which even to-day she feared she was showing.

"I'm called Thais," she remarked with all the non-chalance she could muster.

"What?" Evelyn's eyes goggled.

"Thais. T—h—a—i—s. And all quotations from Dryden banned, if you please."

Evelyn chanted:

Happy, happy, happy pair!
None but the brave,
None but the brave——"

"Oh, do stop it like a good man! If you only knew how much I've heard of 'Alexander's Feast'."

"I'm sorry—Thais. I say, what a wonderful name! But now it's I'm keeping you, isn't it. It's six o'clock."

"First rule of the Civil Service, outside the clerical staff: Come as late as you like in the morning but don't hurry away in the evening. It's badly looked upon. I don't exactly know why but I expect it is because in peace time the Minister comes back after questions in the House and stays till dinner-time, so if you stay late it looks as though you might be summoned at any moment. If you've got something to do, take the whole day off if you like but try to get here by six all the same. Then curse and swear because the typists have gone home. Say you don't know what's coming over the blasted place and people seem to forget there's a war on. You'll be thought no end of a chap."

"Well, I shan't mind. I've no garden or allotment to dig, and there's not much else to do in the early evening nowadays. I live in a flat."

"With your mother?"

"Yes, but however did you guess that?"

"Oh, just psychology. I say, Evelyn, my bootlegger has just given me my monthly bottle of sherry, and I've got it in my desk. Suppose we crack it to christen your job."

Evelyn, who believed in accepting gifts in the spirit in which they were offered, gratefully agreed. While she was out of the room he reflected that he had fallen into the hands of a managing lady. It might have been more prudent to see Miss Mackay first. But no, perish the thought! Who would be such a poltroon as to follow in the train of a pedestrian Miss Mackay, over thirty-nine in any event, when this creature straight from Olympus beckoned? No, for good or ill, Thais represented his immediate destiny. "Thais led the way," he quoted. Thais would lead the way.

Meanwhile the lady in question, while unlocking her desk to get the sherry, was confiding to her best friend, Myra Cunning, who shared her present room, her opinion of her new chief.

"Terribly good looking, my dear. A genuine blond with a wave I'd give my eyes for and, if you'll believe it, blue eyes. Lives with his mother. Terribly sweet but terribly simple. In fact, you might say, dumb."

"Sounds absolute heaven," said Myra.

"He's terrific," said Thais.

"Well, don't get tight, dear," said Myra. "Accidents will happen, you know, if you're not careful."

"Not this child. I'm going to manage this outfit. Bye-bye, Myra, I'll come and see you sometimes if Evelyn can spare me. But I'm not going to introduce you just at present."

Back in Evelyn's room, Thais opened the sherry, and they said "Cheers!" and took a sip. It seemed that they had known one another for quite a long time, and before much more had elapsed Thais was acquainted with the career of Evelyn from the earliest phase to the present day. Presently she discovered that up to 1939 he had done a certain amount of dancing, and suggested that

they might have an evening together on some occasion. Evelyn protested that he was too rusty, but was told that it would not take long to polish him up. By the time they had started their second glass she had decided that they could not do better than begin the process now. She announced that she had a portable gramophone and some dance records in her desk, which seemed inexhaustible. The gramophone was fetched, and to its accompaniment they made a few circuits of the room. It was rather heavy going.

"Did you say nineteen-twenty-nine or nineteen-thirty-nine, Evelyn?" asked Thais, panting a little as she threw herself into the arm-chair.

"I said nineteen-thirty-nine. Sorry I'm so bad."

"It's all right. You'll be fine soon. We'll try again in a minute."

It went a little better this time, but not perfectly yet.

"Swing out a bit on that left foot," commanded Thais.

"That's better. Don't be afraid of letting it zip. But mind the chair!"

The warning came too late. Letting it zip to some purpose, Evelyn backed her across the light steel chair and knocked it over. They themselves crashed to the floor, while her half-filled glass, which she had put down on the chair, rolled away, leaving a thin brown stream on the high-grade carpet.

"Beast! My sherry!" gasped Thais. "And you're squashing the life out of me."

Evelyn quoted:

"At length with love and wine at once oppressed,
The vanquished victor sunk upon her breast."

It was at this moment that Mr. Plumpton, K.C., C.B., came in to inquire how his new recruit was progressing.

CHAPTER III

LOOKING FORWARD

EVELYN made his way homeward in a state of not unpleasing bewilderment. Being, however, of what he himself called a philosophic, and some others a lethargic, temperament, he did not allow his mind to be excessively disturbed by the problems before him. They had not to be faced until to-morrow, and to-morrow would doubtless make its own contribution to their unravelling. Not for nothing was his forehead as smooth and unseamed as a schoolboy's.

He lived with his mother in a small flat in St. John's Wood. Since the commencement of the raids on London most of Mrs. Allardyce's friends had departed to the country, and she now found it difficult enough to make up her Bridge four, without which she found life not worth living. She was too strong-minded a woman and too anxious not to lose her flat in a building of great solidity to follow the example of her friends. Thrice a week she washed plates in a canteen in water which was never quite warm enough, and dried them with cloths which were never quite sufficient in quantity, while within her breast a sense of disgust was partially subjugated by a comforting glow of virtue.

Evelyn found his mother in the kitchen, preparing dinner. In the sitting-room was her friend, Lady O'Hara, the widow of a former Irish Under-Secretary. The two ladies received the news of his appointment with acclamation, Mrs. Allardyce not unaffected by the hope that her

son's contribution to the establishment might be increased. The prospects were good, since Evelyn was of a generous disposition.

"Darling Evelyn, this is marvellous," she said. "I really think that in honour of the occasion we might have just one glass of sherry. What do you think, Maureen?"

Maureen O'Hara gave a cluck like a broody hen, indicative of approval. Mrs. Allardyce came in with the bottle and glasses, kissed her son's smooth brow, and twitched her aristocratic nostrils.

"Darling, you've been celebrating already, haven't you? A glass of sherry on the way home?"

"Yes—I mean, no—as a matter of fact there was some at the office."

"At the office? What a marvellous place! And have you found out all about your work?"

"Not very much so far. But I've been learning the ropes."

"Seen Mr. Plumpton?"

"Yes, I did just see him," said Evelyn.

"Prosy old stick! But he can teach you the ropes if anyone can."

Evelyn's overwhelming candour surged over him. It was so great that it did not permit him even to leave a false impression unintentionally produced.

"As a matter of fact I saw old Plumpton only for a second, and he hadn't much to say." (He was too stupefied to speak, thought Evelyn.)

"Then who's been teaching you the ropes?"

"I've got a new secretary, who seems to know them very well."

"What age?"

"I didn't ask her."

"Of course you didn't ask her, silly. But what age would you put her at?"

"It's hard to say. Twenty-five—might be a year older or a year younger."

"Name?"

"Miss MacNutt," said Evelyn with a slight gulp.

"Pretty?"

"I think some people would call her quite nice-looking," said Evelyn with a judicial air, which, however, had no effect upon his mother.

"My dear Evelyn," she said firmly, "I don't want to know what some people would call her but what you call her."

("I call her Thais, good God!" said Evelyn to himself in panic, but fortunately that was not what Mrs. Allardyce meant.) "I must say I think she's distinctly pretty," he remarked aloud.

"Blonde or brown?"

"This is a pretty thorough catechism, isn't it. Don't badger the child, Ada," struck in the good-natured Lady O'Hara.

"Blonde or brown?" Mrs. Allardyce was not to be deterred.

"Oh, she's quite fair."

"Not platinum?"

"Oh no, absolutely natural."

"That's all you know, Evelyn," said Lady O'Hara, whose own locks owed something to the tinter. "I remember," she went on dreamily, "John used to have a lovely secretary when he was working in Dublin Castle, with an accent like Meath buttermilk. He always talked about 'my Miss Byrne' and I declare I always thought she was fat and forty till one day I went to fetch him out to luncheon, and there was my lady looking like the Colleen Bawn herself. I didn't stop crying for a week."

"And what did John do about it?" asked Mrs. Allardyce.

"Nothing, so far as I know, except for damning and cursing."

"Well," said Mrs. Allardyce grimly, "Evelyn's not going to do anything about it either; I can see that. It strikes me he's got someone who'll keep him up to the mark. That will be an excellent thing, as long as you don't start hugging and kissing all day."

"Mother! I really don't think you've any right to say that. Why should you imagine that a girl you've never seen wants to spend her time kissing and hugging?"

"Pouf!" said Mrs. Allardyce. "I feel sure any girl who's locked up with you, Evelyn, will want to kiss and hug you. And if she's as pretty as you say——"

"But I haven't said."

"It's perfectly clear. If she's as pretty as you think, you won't mind what she does."

Evelyn thought it his duty to protest once more, but inwardly he wondered whether it was likely that Thais would want to kiss and hug him, and if so what his own attitude would be.

"Girls are getting very free and easy nowadays," said Lady O'Hara, looking back with a sigh for the wasted opportunities of her own youth.

"Nonsense, Maureen, they always were, though they went about it differently when the conventions were different."

"One thing, in my day in Ireland," said Lady O'Hara, "there was never a house without its hay-loft. That was a great convenience for the romantically minded. What the girls of my generation would have done without hay-lofts I really can't think. They were dreadfully repressed in some ways, but you can't be repressed in a hay-loft. At least I never found I could. I suppose there's never a

hay-loft in the Ministry of Armaments and Supply, Evelyn?"

"I'm afraid not. But I think you've both got hopelessly wrong ideas into your heads. Miss MacNutt is very serious. She's—she's a competent secretarial machine." He felt proud of defending her with her own words.

"That's exactly what John always used to say about his Miss Byrne. And I believed him, God help me for a poor fool, till I met her."

"Well, there may be something in it. We must hope for the best," said Mrs. Allardyce. "And there's no doubt, Evelyn, that a woman who's good at business can be a great help to a man like you who only wants to do what he's told."

Over dinner she expanded the subject. She foresaw Evelyn, guided and made rope-minded by Miss MacNutt, becoming the linch-pin of the Ministry. He would go on and on and on; he would go up and up and up. When he objected that he could not go very far on monobelium and that at present he did not even know how he was to make monobelium provide him with a full day's work, she replied that if that were so he must add to his interests and activities. There must be scope for someone who was not completely fossilized. And surely someone who had actually done a little business would cut out all the lawyers without briefs, and the journalists whose articles were never printed, and the school masters who were sacked at the end of every term, and all the poor lame dogs who were driven in from the streets to staff the new ministries. Ah, she reflected, if she had Evelyn's chance she would make something of it. She would manage or die in the attempt. Evelyn almost felt sorry that she could not be given the chance.

Mrs. Allardyce's theories of war-time administration

were simple but clearly defined. The government departments were expanded or created in order to provide employment for those not wanted in the services but thrown out of work by the contraction of private business. You could not expect to do much good in them because there was comparatively little good to be done. You might, however, reasonably hope to get on because the competition was so weak. And it was, she vaguely and illogically concluded, everyone's duty not only to himself but also to the country in these desperate days, to get on. An inveterate optimist, she was disposed now to the belief that Miss MacNutt would provide the spur to endeavour which her son so obviously required. She had no very high opinion of her own sex, particularly of the younger members of it, and least of all of those in government offices. On the other hand, she believed in its managing qualities. She herself had borne but one son and one daughter—the latter married to a naval officer and for the moment living in Scotland—and had observed how competently and thoroughly Amanda, from the age of two onwards, had both managed her own affairs and controlled those of her elder brother. So long as there was not too much hugging and kissing, this Miss MacNutt's influence was likely to be salutary, and perhaps a certain amount of amatory trifling would be well enough in its way. In any event there was nothing she could do about it. Mrs. Allardyce was not a rigid moralist, nor was she given to worrying herself about matters outside her control. Evelyn might not have inherited all her strength of mind but there was no doubt about where he got his philosophy of existence.

If Mrs. Allardyce's vision could have been stretched to cover the distance and pierce the obstacles between the flat in St. John's Wood and a flatlet in Chelsea, she might

have congratulated herself upon her shrewdness. In the flatlet was the subject of her speculations, Miss Thais MacNutt. As an aid to thought she had donned a pair of dark blue slacks, so well cut that they gave an air of boyishness to a figure of which boyishness was not the predominant characteristic. Such boyishness as was achieved down below was, however, belied by the curves which gracefully expanded a sky-blue jumper, the short sleeves exposing well-shaped arms which their owner, despite the limited opportunities afforded by her scanty leisure, had contrived to tint in the sun of that hot summer to a pleasant shade of brown. The general effect was attractive. There can be few males worthy of the name who, contemplating comely, sun-browned feminine arms allied with honey-coloured hair and dark eyes, do not promptly decide that those arms would look well round their own necks.

On this occasion, however, there were no males present to indulge in such unseemly imaginings. Nor was Thais in a sentimental mood. As she lay on her silk-covered divan—convertible into a fairly orthodox bed—she was engaged in what was even then becoming one of the most fashionable war-time occupations. She was planning. But her planning was not altruistic; it was mainly concerned with her own future, not that of land for housing, nursing mothers, West Indian sugar-planters, or anti-Hitlerian Jews in Germany. She had a pencil in her right hand and a writing-block in her left. She meant business.

Whatever she meant, business was coy. Wooed she never so ardently, it held her off. She found herself wandering into by-paths, considering first of all the background which ought to have been filled in after the rest of the picture was complete. The most important of

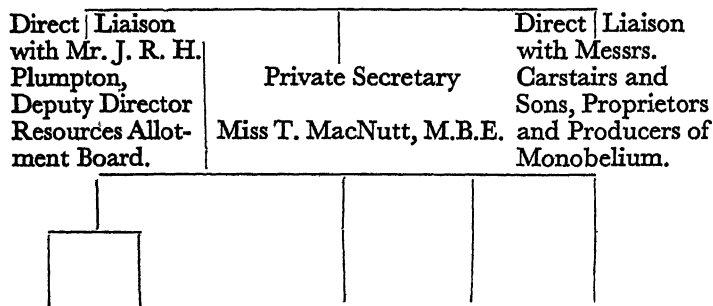
these by-paths was that of personal relations with her employer. This afternoon, she felt, her conduct and department had not been perfect. She had been pert where she should have been professional. Sentiment should be kept out, and sentiment, in her experience, was the half-sister of pertness, always following where it led. ("But it's all very well, my girl," she said to herself, "you're very brave and very strong-minded now, but you know what you're like sometimes—absolutely a disgrace to yourself and your principles.") Well, at all events sentiment should not be unduly encouraged, allowed to have everything its own way. But she really must get away from all these trifles and back to hard and sober planning. She must make a good start, and she was to start to-morrow. For some time, with furrowed brow and compressed lips, she worked with her pencil. She then bit the pencil, turned on her back and stared at the ceiling, gave the pencil another bite, lit a cigarette, bent resolutely over the writing-block once more.

It was no good. After long travail this is what she had produced:

BRANCH K.22 (Monobelium)

Chief (Graded as Principal Assistant Secretary)

Mr. Evelyn Allardyce, C.B.E.



Finally she threw the block on to the floor and the stub of her second cigarette out of the window. After all, she would have to take things as they came and seize the inspiration which time and circumstances presented. To this decision have come many planners of the past; to it will come in the end many planners of the present.

CHAPTER IV

GOING TO IT

EVELYN entered his room at the Ministry on the stroke of half-past nine. A man in shirt-sleeves was just completing the installation of a second telephone on his desk. It was, he explained, for the house line, and he had been directed to put it in by Mr. Allardyce's secretary, who had said that the matter was one of urgency. He apologized that it had not been completed by Mr. Allardyce's arrival, but he had had only a few minutes' notice. He trusted that no inconvenience had been caused. Evelyn replied with his usual courtesy that he could contrive to get on without the house line for two or three minutes. In point of fact the man was gone within not much more than that time.

Evelyn then sat down at his desk. He thought the twin telephone receivers looked well. He noted with pleasure and even some excitement that there was a note in his "in" basket, but it proved to be only a few lines of thanks from Mr. Plumpton for his congratulations. There was an extreme formality, even for Mr. Plumpton, in the wording

which Evelyn concluded was due to the writer's shock over the accident at the dancing lesson on the previous evening. At this point Thais entered with a file in her hand. She gave him a brisk, business-like, and almost distant good morning. Then she went straight on to inform him that he had to face a problem from the very start. There had been an unprecedented increase in the applications for monobelium. Evelyn glanced through the list of demands, noting how neatly they were set out and concluding that his secretary must have been at work already for some time. He realized that they were very large in proportion to the quantity which he knew to be in stock.

It was now ten, the hour at which John Carstairs reached his office. Evelyn rang him up and consulted him, to learn that in view of the ever-growing demands for monobelium, in many cases for vital purposes, it would be dangerous to deplete the stock to anything like the extent which the figures just read out to him would necessitate. Evelyn knew there had been some rationing in the past; it would have to be sharper to-day. He ran his eye down the list again. He could tell at a glance what most of the firms were doing and the urgency of their requirements. To these he could apportion their due share of his resources without difficulty. There were, however, a couple about which he was not quite sure. He suggested to his secretary that he should seek further information about them from Mr. Plumpton.

"Um, yes," said Thais, "if there's no hurry."

He replied that he thought there was.

"Then don't consult Plumpton," said Thais. "He'll ask for time to consider the question, and that will mean time for the note to get to the bottom of his basket, and you may have to wait three days. Motto: when in doubt don't consult anyone, least of all Plummy. Just cut the

demands by double the percentage you cut the others by."

"I think, if you don't mind——"

"Please don't say that. Who's the boss of this business?"

"Well, you are, so far."

"No, no, no," said Thais earnestly. "If that's a joke it's not a good one. I'm here to do what I'm told. If I can give any advice while you're still——"

"While I'm still green?"

"While you're still new, I shall be very glad to, but even then there's no need for you to take it. Now, what's the objection to my rough-and-ready scheme?"

"In the first place, it's a bit rough and ready. In the second place, I'm not cutting them by the same percentages. Cork and Hickling, I should imagine, can't be cut by more than five per cent. Barkers and Watts United Steel can have fifteen lopped off quite safely. They're not in full production and I believe they're messing about."

"But—but you really do know something about it!" said Thais in almost a frightened tone.

"God bless me, you didn't think I knew nothing at all, did you?"

"Well, I didn't somehow expect you to know so much. This is going to be even more interesting than I thought, but also more difficult and dangerous. You see, the people who come into these war-time ministries are divided into two classes, those who know nothing about what's going on and the experts. The first lot have the great merit that they don't hold things up. They just sign things and let the manufacturers get on with the job. But the experts are generally a positive handicap. They're always getting new brain-waves and they never agree with each other."

"So it's between those who don't obstruct and those who do. But what about the people who help things on?"

"Well," said Thais doubtfully, "I have heard about them—I heard about one only a month ago—so I suppose they must exist. But I've never met one."

"We," said Evelyn firmly, "are going to be a team that helps things on. Does that fire your ambition?"

"It's terrific!" She held out her hand and they shook. She added regretfully that it was rather too early for another glass of sherry to seal the pledge. Then she suggested that he might like to talk things over on the telephone with the two firms whose demands had raised doubts in his mind.

"That's a good notion," said Evelyn, "but won't it take a desperately long time?"

"Not when I work it," said Thais firmly. "You watch."

She picked up the telephone and informed the switch-board operator that she must be put straight through to Cork and Hickling; the matter was one of urgent priority. Then, putting her hand over the mouthpiece, she confided to Evelyn that someone would probably catch her one day or another at this practice, forbidden to all but the very great, in which case she might get the sack, but that it was the one way to get things done. It proved effective in this instance; for the call came through in two minutes. Cork and Hickling, brief and businesslike, agreed to accept a five per cent reduction.

Then the process was repeated with Barkers and Watts United Steel. But here there was a long palaver. This time it was Evelyn who put his hand over the mouthpiece, to inform Thais that the manager did not seem to know the amount of the demand; it must have been filled in by

a subordinate. In dumb show Thais drove a dagger into the vitals of Barkers and Watts.

"Don't let them get away with that!" she whispered fiercely. "Sock 'em! Give 'em hell! Save you no end of trouble later on."

Coldly Evelyn remarked into the telephone that monobellium was of national moment and that the filling-in of the demand forms was a matter to be decided at the highest level. It would make things very difficult if there were a repetition of this occurrence. Meanwhile he regretted that he would have to reduce the allotment by fifteen per cent. After some further conversation he hung up the receiver.

"The fellow's crawling," he announced with a blush.

Thais jumped with delight and declared that this was certainly the stuff to give them.

"I wish," said Evelyn a trifle sourly, "you wouldn't behave as if I was an intelligent dog who has learnt a new trick nicely."

"You're terrific!" said Thais.

Evelyn told her not to wait. He would make out the allotments and then send for her to type the list, send the necessary forms to Carstairs and Sons, and write such letters to the firms as were desirable. Thais obediently vanished, without looking hurt, for which he was grateful.

Meanwhile in an office in the Midlands, the glass front of which looked over a vast expanse of workshops, two men were eyeing each other in perplexity.

"Why the hell didn't you bring me that form?"

"Now, look here, Mike, be reasonable. You've never signed it before, never seen the blamed thing."

"Well, I've darned well got to in future. But what I want to know is, what the hell have they imported into the Ministry? Cripes, he knew what we're making and that

we weren't fully tooled up. What is he, I ask you? How did he find out?

"Perhaps he asked Production B₃; they've got our reports."

"Don't be funny. It gives me a headache. Did you ever hear of Production B₃ finding a report inside two days, let alone understanding it? No, there's some guy there who *knows*."

"Well, anyway, I suppose we can manage with the fifteen per cent reduction."

"Of course we can manage with it. Hell of a fine general manager you are, aren't you, if you don't know what we can manage with. We could do with a reduction of twenty-five. And don't you forget to bring me that form next time or there'll be trouble."

"You're in a nasty temper to-day, Mike. What's bitten you?"

"Just worrying. That fellow at the Ministry fairly knocked me over. The whole thing's uncanny—makes you feel as if you'd seen a ghost. We'd better put in a hell of a report on what we're doing in the line of welfare—I suppose we are doing somep'n—so as to put us back into their good books."

"Right, Mike. I'll fix that. It'll be a hell of a report, the sort of thing they can make a par out of for the evening papers—an ex-manicurist is welfare worker. She still looks after the hands'."

"Well, make it snappy. But I must find out what they've got in that Ministry. I can't sleep till I do. Jeepers Creepers, that guy *knows*!"

Having made out the allotments, Evelyn summoned Thais—on the house telephone, which he found pleasingly business-like—handed her the sheet on which he had been working them out, and asked her to type the

list if she thought it satisfactory in that form. She read it standing slightly behind him so that he could not see her face, but a faint disapproval communicated itself to him by some telepathic influence. He was growing used to this. He wondered if he would ever be adequate to the occasion by the standards of Thais.

"Well, what's the matter now?" he inquired.

"This is all right for our purposes."

"It is for our purposes."

"But I suggest it should be circulated to Carstairs and Sons and Plumpton, with an extra copy for Production B₃, and one to the Minister's private secretary. And if you do that it ought to go in four columns: one, the firm's name; two, the demand; three, the allotment; and four a series of little essays on your reasons. You could say what the firm is doing, what its particular importance is, give an estimate of its present and future efficiency."

"Will that do the people who get it a lot of good?"

"I don't know if it will do them good, but I'm sure it will make them *feel* good. It will show them the exact position."

Evelyn wondered feebly whether the exact position would help anyone, but he dismissed the unworthy thought. Thais evidently knew how these things should be done. Besides, he rather prided himself upon his capacity for writing succinct *précis*. He pointed out, however, that it would be a long job and that he was not sure whether or not he had enough detail in his head. Thais replied very logically that, if such were the case, it was obviously necessary that the information should be put on paper and filed for reference. If there were, she said, any point on which he found himself at a loss, she would put through a trunk call to the management of the firm concerned and get the information. She proposed that he

should first dictate the letters. After luncheon she would get a typist from the "pool" to write them and they would work this thing out together in the afternoon.

"And by the way," she added casually, "I've decided to get a permanent typist. I feel sure I shall need one to help me. That's with your permission, of course. I've seen the Establishment Officer."

Evelyn wondered what would happen if he should refuse permission. In fact he replied that she must of course get a typist, if she wanted one. But he understood they were hard to find. In the City now——

"Oh, in the City!" said Thais scornfully. "That's another thing altogether. This is work of national importance. As a matter of fact," she went on, "typists are getting hard to find now. Luckily I've got a pal in the Ministry of Employment who can find me one, even if it means calling her up specially. I tell you what, I'll go to my own room now and ring her up. Then I'll come and take the letters and hand them over to a pool typist. Anyone can read my shorthand. Then we'll go to lunch."

"We—of course, how stupid of me!" said Evelyn, blushing hotly. "I meant to ask you. While you're putting your call through I'll ring up and book a table."

Thais having departed once more, he consulted his note-case and, finding that it held a sufficiency of cash, boldly picked up the telephone and rang up Claridges. But alas! disappointment awaited him. Claridges regretted very much to say that every table was booked.

While he was debating whether to try the Ritz or the Berkeley, Thais was speaking over her line.

"I want Official Secretarial Branch, and I want to speak to Miss Skittish, please. That you, Lydia? This is Thais speaking. How are you, old dear? Oh, did you,

that's terrific. My goodness, that is terrific. I'm all right—hard work, you know, and all that. Now look, can you find me a shorthand-typist who's not imbecile or an epileptic? Yes, I know they're in short supply or I wouldn't have bothered you, but do be an angel. There must be some still knocking about who can be spared. Get one from one of the learned societies or the B.B.C. if necessary. Oh, you have one? That's grand. Well, as long as she has decent speeds and can read her own stuff and spell reasonably well—Fat and plain? Oh, that'll suit me excellently. I don't care if she looks like the backside of a bus. In fact—— Oh, well, I find they waste time in flirtations if they're too pretty. Well, that's terrific of you, Lydia. Send her round as soon as you can, to-morrow if you like. Good-bye and all the best."

That was most satisfactory, she thought. Evelyn was hardly likely to see the girl once in a week, and if he did she flattered herself that his eyes would not rest upon her for long. Still, there was no good in taking unnecessary risks. You had to take some risks all day and every day, but why add to them gratuitously? She was humming gaily to herself when she returned, to meet Evelyn's blank face.

"I tried Claridges, but they're booked up, and I'm afraid everyone else will be. We've left it so late," he said.

Thais asked if she might try her hand and rang Claridges once again. She spoke in her pleasantest voice, and when she tried to be affable her voice dripped honey.

"This is Branch K.22, Ministry of Armaments and Supply. The head of the branch, Mr. Evelyn Allardyce, has a most important business luncheon engagement. He told me—I'm his secretary—to book a table, but I'm afraid we left it very late. I know it's terrible to ask for

one at this hour, but this is *most* important. I throw myself on your mercy. Can you possibly help? Oh, you can just manage? That is so good of you. Ever so many thanks. Yes, A-l-l-a-r-d-y-c-e, but of course you know the name. Yes, I was sure you would. One o'clock. Good-bye."

"Astonishing if they did," said Evelyn.

"Well, they know it now anyhow. You see, those places have to keep a table or two up their sleeves for regular customers or important people."

"Like us."

"Precisely. My motto is, never go aboard on the lower deck if you can get the skipper to invite you on to the quarterdeck. But, I say, Evelyn, this is wonderful of you. Claridges! It's terrific. I only wish I'd put my best frock on."

Evelyn assured her that she looked terrific in the one she was wearing, a sentiment which was greeted by the snort reserved by women for ill-placed praise of their attire by men which shows the latter to be mere time-serving flatterers. Then they got down to the business of the letters, which took half an hour.

"Talking about clothes," said Thais, shutting her notebook and resuming the conversation as if it had never lapsed, "talking about clothes, you've got a very good tailor."

Evelyn purred gently at what to a right-minded young—or old—man must still be one of the most agreeable of compliments.

"He's supposed to be one of the best in London, I believe. But it's no credit to me. My cousin Rupert Carstairs took me to him and I've stayed with him ever since."

"But you haven't got the right sort of suit."

Evelyn sprang to his feet, cheeks aflame.

"That's the last insult. That's the one thing I can't and won't stand. I think it's a darned good suit. What have you got against it? I——"

"Oh, Evelyn, don't get into a passion. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it was a bad suit. It's a lovely suit. What I meant was that in your present job you would look more dignified in a black coat and striped trousers."

"Dignified?" asked Evelyn, slightly mollified though still angry.

"I don't mean old or frumpish. I mean like one of the tops, one of the people who get on. You know, like the head of a department. Grey suits are thought what you might call clerical here."

"Well, if you think it necessary—anyhow, I'm due for a new suit."

"Hurrah! Evelyn, you'll look terrific. I tell you what, it's half-past twelve now. We'll take a taxi and call on your tailor on the way, and I'll help you choose. Let's."

Ten minutes later they pushed open the well-polished old mahogany door of Messrs. Cutwell & Chargem. In the darkish room a grandfather clock ticked slowly. From the walls officers in various uniforms of the mid-nineteenth century looked down upon them. In one corner stood a wooden horse with a saddle on it, and, before he could stop her, Thais was seated astride it.

"Good morning, Mr. Chargem," said Evelyn, as a tall man emerged from the rearward recesses, blinking at the display of leg on the dummy horse.

"Good morning to you, sir. Very nice weather, is it not?"

"Lovely. Mr. Chargem, I thought of having a black jacket and waistcoat with striped trousers."

"Double or single-breasted, Mr. Allardyce? Double-

breasted black coats are beginning to come in. I don't think I ever saw one before the war."

"I hadn't thought of that. But I can make up my mind later on."

There was not much difficulty in choosing the cloth for the coat, since there is not a great deal of choice in black material. The question as to whether it was to be "S.B." or "D.B." was more difficult to answer. It was, however, another matter as regards the trousers. The choice resolved itself to one between a cloth of tasteful grey and another with stripes of alternative grey and black. Evelyn rather favoured the latter, but trousers made from it would cost a guinea more because there was silk interwoven with the texture. Mr. Chargem was patience itself, but Thais looked at her watch with a slight frown. Mr. Chargem moved to the other side of the room to bid farewell to a client departing after a fitting, and she suddenly called across to him:

"I've persuaded Mr. Allardyce to take both. Two suits, one single-breasted, one double-breasted. I'm sure he's right. Now you know, Evelyn, you said you would."

"Well, these materials are getting harder to find every day," said Mr. Chargem. "You won't regret it, Mr. Allardyce. Now, let me see, we're full of work and short of hands. Suppose we say a first fitting this day fortnight for both suits. Right. Well, good day to you, sir and madam. Much pleasanter without the raids, is it not? Let us hope they don't start again."

They left in silence, Evelyn because he could not speak, Thais because she did not dare to. It took a good deal to frighten her, but now she was frightened by Evelyn's expression. However, she reflected, a luncheon table in a good restaurant was the place to get over a fit of temper quickly.

CHAPTER V

PETTICOAT INFLUENCE

THEY were ushered to their table in due form. Thais had sat down and Evelyn was about to do so when he heard his Christian name called. His cousin, Lady Eva Carstairs, with a woman friend, was advancing across the restaurant.

Lady Eva, tall, willowy, with fair hair fast turning grey—a process which she disdained to impede—was very much a woman of her age and class. And where can you match it? We rave about the young American, with her curiosity, her vivacity, and her pretty legs. We applaud the Frenchwoman in the thirties, *soignée*, alert, and polished. But the Englishwoman of the aristocracy in the early fifties is *hors concours* in her age group. She may not have been educated at all in her growing years and her self-education later on may have been somewhat confined, but it is thorough in its way and above all in certain graces. By her age the American has very likely developed into a hardfaced rattle, talking the hind legs off countless metaphorical ducks, full of a stereotyped excitement about persons and things which became her in youth but does so no longer. The Frenchwoman will have grown either hawk-like or obese, according to temperament, and in either case assumed many of the less attractively matronly characteristics.

Lady Eva had borne two sons and a daughter. One son was dead, and her son-in-law was a prisoner of war. She was a grandmother three times over. She realized that

her world was dissolving, and she had found that world good. She was enduring the discomfort of living in a large house with an inadequate staff combined with the odium of possessing such a house at all. Yet she was neither a rattle, hawk-like, obese, nor unattractively matronly. She was gentle, kindly if sometimes aloof, generally rather *distracte*—"bothered" her children called it—capable of talking intelligently and charmingly to every sort of human being except the vulgar-minded; well-read, travelled, tolerant, able to run any business if she had someone to do the donkey-work for her. Above all she was still beautiful, with the beauty that fades gracefully and is not forcibly renewed. She may have had a vein of the goose within her, but how much preferable is that to a vein of the vixen or the she-cat or—well, let us say, the female dog!

"Darling Evelyn, how nice to see you! I came up last night, and heard all your news from John. And I'm going to write to-night to the Minister, Mr. Peppercorn, about you."

"Oh, Cousin Eva, that's so kind of you! But do you think it would be wise?"

"Of course it would, my dear. A letter of recommendation never does any harm."

"I didn't even know you knew him."

"Well, it's a wonder I know anyone nowadays. I come up so seldom. But one does meet people from time to time. I fancy he's not altogether unaffected by a title, even a courtesy title like mine. Between ourselves, he's just a little bit of a fraud, your Mr. Peppercorn."

"I haven't laid eyes on him yet, but from one or two things I have seen I shouldn't be surprised if you were right."

"How would it be if John and I asked him to dinner

here on Monday night, and you too? I shall be at the flat for the next four days. Of course I know it's short notice."

"That would be very kind of you, Cousin Eva, if you think it would be all right and not look as if you were pushing me down his throat."

"Not a bit of it. I'll ring him up after luncheon instead of writing. It will be much less trouble. Well, we'll hope to see you on Monday—you come anyhow—and now I mustn't leave my poor Mrs. Livingstone alone any longer. I say, Evelyn, what a pretty gel! No, please don't explain. That would spoil it all."

They exchanged brief inquiries, she for his mother, he for her daughter, who was living at Carstairs Hall with her child since her husband had been captured. Then she floated on her way.

Evelyn discovered on returning to his table that Thais was no more insensible to a title than Mr. Peppercorn was supposed to be. She was also properly impressed by Lady Eva's appearance and had decided that she was the real thing—which, whatever might be the assessment of the thing's intrinsic worth, she indubitably was. And, after all, in an age which specializes in the socially bogus, that is an appreciable distinction. At the same time Thais was enthusiastic about her scheme for inviting the Minister to dinner. She had once, she said, met a man whose career was notably advanced by a luncheon with an Under-Secretary. She gently advised Evelyn not to prevent the Minister from doing the talking because that was his prerogative. At the back of her mind was some anxiety lest Evelyn's simplicity and candour should do ill service to his cause. She did not fear that he would be unduly loquacious.

Evelyn's annoyance about the order for the two suits

having been temporarily forgotten, luncheon proceeded pleasantly. To those whose memories have become blurred by what passes for sausage meat, by Algerian burgundy, and by utility jam in the sweets it may be necessary to offer a reminder that in the summer of 1941 there was still good food and drink to be obtained in a good London restaurant. The company, if wearing a certain air of strain as a result of the raids of the winter and spring, had not yet taken on the melancholy guise of total war. The Ministry of Employment had not yet got into its full stride, and there were still some young girls about who looked decorative rather than useful. They may indeed have been useful as well as decorative. Thais was the latter, and Evelyn knew how much hung upon her shoulders. Yet even Thais, he was forced to admit, lacked that final peach-like bloom only to be attained by those who have not much to do except to acquire it. Lady Eva was too great a lady to want it or think about it. It is, indeed, seldom seen in the great.

In a selected company of the public in a west-end restaurant, however, it aids the fare in creating an atmosphere of luxury. Evelyn and Thais forgot their cares. For the first time since they had met, except for the brief episode of the dancing-lesson, they did not talk shop. She learnt all there was to know about him, which was in truth not very much. He heard about her mother in Wiltshire, and the pony she herself used to ride on the downs, about her sister who was a Fanny and her young brother who was going into the Navy. They talked gaily and happily, Evelyn uttering at least one word to every eight of hers. They even got to the stage when they seemed to know each other so well that speech was not obligatory and short spells of silence became natural—a very pleasant phase in the relations between

young man and woman. Presently, however, the brow of Thais puckered again. She was thinking of the significance of Lady Eva. Evelyn's family connections increased his possibilities. Really, there was no limit to them if he were properly managed. She felt like a trainer who suddenly discovers that his good colt is even better than he thought, with quite a chance of winning the Derby. Her responsibility came home to her. And when, on the way back to the office in a taxi, he did not attempt even to hold her hand, she realized even more clearly than before that he was not an enterprising person.

There was nothing but routine that afternoon and on Saturday morning. On Monday Evelyn returned to work in a mood of gratitude to Thais. Sunday had been a land-mark in the social history of the war, the day of the announcement of the rationing of clothes. The two suits on order now took on a very different aspect. They appeared no longer as an extravagance but as a prudent investment. Yet he decided he would say nothing about the matter. If Thais were an inspired genius she would spurn a compliment; if she had had warning of the new regulations her action would appear slightly immoral and was best not discussed, even though he had benefited from it.

When she appeared in a new-looking frock of the latest style he suspected the worst, but the subject was driven from his mind by the gravity of her air and by her immediate announcement:

"Soapy Sam wants to see you at half-past ten."

"Soapy Sam being?"

"Oh, the Minister. His private secretary rang up directly I got in. It's something to do with the memorandum on allocation."

"I hope he doesn't strafe me for waste of paper."

"I've never known anyone strafed for that in this office," said Thais. "But, as far as I could judge, he was pleased. Now can I trust you to say the right thing?"

"Well, I don't know. What would the right thing be?"

"It would partly depend on what he says. But the great thing is to let him do all the talking he wants to but be ready to fill in the gaps when he dries up. Be modest but firm. I needn't urge you to be modest——"

"But you think I need urging to be firm. What about?"

"Oh, things in general. But you can be a bit knowing too. Soapy Sam's private conversation, I'm told, is less elevated than his speeches."

"I'm sure I hope so. I see—modest, firm, but a bit knowing. It all sounds dreadfully difficult," said Evelyn dolefully.

"Now don't begin to fuss. It will all be quite easy. He's a good soul really and everyone likes him. The man to keep away from is the Under-Secretary, Septimus Skinner, who's a twirp. Shall I get you a nice cup of tea?"

Evelyn declined the stimulant, but went along the corridor to the great man's room an hour later in nervous mood. He entered the private secretary's room next door. There, to his astonishment, he found Mr. Plumptre, who greeted him with something like effusion and informed him that he had come to introduce him.

"I gather—er—indeed I may say, yes, I may safely say that he is——"

Buzz!

The buzzer-bell from the next room was so loud that Evelyn started violently. Mr. Plumptre was snuffed on the instant. The private secretary went to a communi-

cating door and returned with an invitation that they should enter. Mr. Plumpton hesitated in the doorway, made as if to push Evelyn in first, then realized that it was obviously his task to take the lead, entered the presence. Evelyn followed. A large black-clad figure faced them across an enormous desk on which stood a bowl of roses as big as a wash-basin. All was on a large scale.

"I've—er—brought my young recruit, yes, recruit is the word, to see you as you desired," said Mr. Plumpton. "Mr. Allardyce has already taken a burden off my—er—shoulders." He wriggled his shoulders expressively to show how much easier they had become.

The Minister rose and held out his hand with that affable air which constituted such an asset to his political and social career. He murmured a few words of welcome, called upon them to admire his Betty Uprichards, which were indeed perfection itself, engaged in a little further small talk with Plumpton, and then dismissed him. Then he waved Evelyn to a chair.

Samuel Peppercorn is so well known to the war generation that it may seem superfluous to introduce him. And indeed there would be no point in dilating upon those aspects which come into the public eye, the wind-swept hair, the excellent clothes worn with a studied negligence, any more than the oratory which began hesitatingly, almost stammeringly, on a low tone and rose to a crescendo of turbulent eloquence, borne by a voice the modulations of which made the listener imagine that the speaker was pulling out sonorous and pathetic organ-stops in turn. A slight unctuousness of demeanour and the habit of making show of washing his hands, which together had earned him the disrespectful nickname bestowed on him by Thais, are not less notorious. Yet it may be that

other characteristics which had escaped general notice are worth recording.

Mr. Peppercorn was actuated by two predominant motives, a laudable ambition—entailing a love of publicity which the age did not consider dishonourable—and an intense dislike of his colleague in the Ministry of Sustenance. The former led to much public speaking. He spoke well enough in the House, without always quite catching its manner or its spirit, but much better on the platform, where he was in great demand. Nearly all the popular slogans which had been so helpful in nerving the nation to endure the strain of war had been originated by Mr. Peppercorn. The latter was the despair of his public relations officers and advertisement writers; for, whenever he considered that the Minister of Sustenance had been given, or had given himself, excessive publicity he insisted upon the immediate production of a scheme designed to recover the lost ground. Something of an expert himself in the arts of publicity, he was hard to please, but gracious and grateful when the work was well done. His chief public relations officer, Mr. Shick, who was said by the malicious to provide him with assistance in his speeches on all matters from munitions to post-war reconstruction, had nothing to complain about in the long run.

Mr. Peppercorn was a member of the Labour Party, but had no links with the Trade Union side. He was in fact the part proprietor of an obscure but fairly lucrative trade newspaper. He had made his own way in politics and was justly proud of the fact. If his honourable friends had no great affection for him, they none the less considered him as an immense asset, especially on the platform.

War changes the surroundings, the outlook, even the

personal character of many men, but there could have been few in whom it had wrought a revolution so profound as in Mr. Peppercorn. Until 1939 he had lived in a comfortable house in Surbiton. He had caught the same train home every day, rarely dining in London above four times a year. His only club was a local bowling-club. Apart from the House of Commons, he had hardly any friends and only a few business acquaintances outside Surbiton.

The war had brought him into another world. He lived now in a flat shining with chromium plating, in a vast concrete block, being one of the few tenants who spoke the English language with tolerable correctitude. He was a member of the Tilbury and the Macclesfield Clubs, and the Tilbury was still considered slightly raffish, a resort for men-about-town. He was, however, more often to be seen at luncheon time in the Virginia Creeper, a restaurant much patronized by the stage. He did not take Mrs. Peppercorn there; in fact he did not very often take her anywhere. But he was occasionally seen lunching with a much younger and more comely female with blonde hair. He smoked a cigar after luncheon, though cigars were dear and hard to obtain, whereas before the war, when they were relatively cheap and on sale everywhere, it had never occurred to him to buy them. Instead of driving himself in his own modest 14 horse-power roadster, he was now driven by a chauffeur in a 25 horse-power saloon, marked "Priority". He knew many fine ladies such as Lady Eva Carstairs. It would be grossly unfair to say that Mr. Peppercorn, who was a humane man, was enjoying the war, but it could not be denied that he was enjoying himself. It was not office, since he had already held office in time of peace, which had brought him to

the centre of things; it was the war. It had certainly made a new man of Mr. Peppercorn.

He now tapped a document on his desk with his forefinger, and Evelyn realized that it was his memorandum. But he had ceased to worry. The great man was clearly in benignant mood.

"This," said Mr. Peppercorn, "is the goods. This is the sort of thing I want, and, damme, I don't get it."

"I'm glad, Sir—I mean glad it's what you want."

"It puts me into the picture. It shows me where I am. But I've a suggestion to make. Next time make it even a little more detailed and put a bit of polish on to it—you know the sort of thing—and, damme, I'll have it printed and circulated to the Cabinet!"

"Oh!" said Evelyn.

"Yes, I will. It's very important that they should be in touch with the situation. And I think it would be a comfort to them to know at such a moment that we had got things straight."

"I feel sure it would," murmured Evelyn.

"You see, there's a darned sight too much muddling going on. Now, far be it from me to run down a colleague who's also a very old personal friend——" here Mr. Peppercorn washed his hands very briskly—"but of course he gets let down sometimes. It's Ramsbotham in the Ministry of Sustenance I'm talking about—this dreadful business about the eggs. He's controlled them, and now millions of them are going bad in the hot weather. I'm told they've poisoned one of the best salmon rivers in Scotland by tipping in rotten eggs. It's a dreadful business."

"Awful," said Evelyn.

"It's the sort of thing we've got to avoid in this

Ministry—we've darned well got to avoid it!" Mr. Peppercorn brought his fist down on the desk in quite an intimidating manner. "Now your memorandum, my young friend, is the sort of thing which will help us to avoid that sort of thing. And I may also say——" Mr. Peppercorn washed his hands once again—"that it is the sort of thing which will show the Cabinet what we are doing and that we are thoroughly efficient."

Evelyn made an appreciative noise. He was thinking to himself that this striking proof of the Ministry's efficiency had been almost accidental. He had been half inclined to turn down the suggestion of Thais on the ground that the information was needed by no one but himself. He realized how great was her wisdom.

"And now, Mr. Allardyce," went on Mr. Peppercorn, "I'll only say that if you want any help or get stuck, come to me. If it's really serious you can by-pass Plumpt-ton"—he by-passed Plumpt-ton with a gesture—"and ring up my private secretary. And if you want any further staff you shall have it. Now good-bye. Oh no, there's just one other thing. I'm very pleased to find that I've got a cousin of my old friend Lady Eva Carstairs on my staff. And I'm looking forward very much to our dinner together to-night. A great figure that. She does an immense amount of good in the world."

"I suppose she does," said Evelyn.

"Oh, immense." Mr. Peppercorn indicated with a sweep of his arm the immensity of the good done by Lady Eva.

Evelyn came out in a state of mingled excitement and bewilderment. In the corridor he crossed the Establishment Officer, who inquired whether he were satisfied with Miss MacNutt. Evelyn replied truthfully that he was.

"I suppose you decided that Miss Mackay was rather lacking in drive," said the Establishment Officer.

Evelyn, with his usual candour, admitted that he had not seen that lady, whereupon the Establishment Officer emitted a harsh, croaking noise which might have been a cry of pain but might just possibly have been a laugh. Staring after him as he passed on down the passage, Evelyn concluded that it was a laugh. In fact, the Establishment Officer's shoulders were shaking.

He reached his room feeling somewhat hot and bothered. Thais was awaiting him. He gave her a full account of the interview with the Minister. Her face became grave as she listened. Great things, she had evidently decided, were upon them. The crisis was closer than she had dared to expect. She stood with arms akimbo. She might have been an active staff officer listening to a far from active general's account of his last interview with his commander-in-chief on the eve of battle. So much would depend upon her.

As soon as she could decently return to her own room she did so, picked up the telephone, and rang up Lydia Skittish at the Ministry of Employment.

"Now Lydia darling," she began, "I'm terribly sorry but I *must* have another girl at once. Oh, my dear, I know all about how hard it is, but the work's piling absolutely yards high on my table and I've grown six grey hairs over the week-end. This time I believe I could just manage without shorthand if you'd send me a good typist-clerk. You will? My word, you're a real brick! Yes, I'm all right except for the frightful work. Yes, it's frightful. But if you let me have that typist it'll ease it just a bit. Forty-two? Oh, no, that's not a bit too old—as long as she's not an absolute gorgon who refuses to do what she's told. Oh, yes, the work's terrific,

but it's rather exciting. My new boss? Oh, very nice but a bit of a driver, you know. Keeps your humble servant's nose bang down on the grindstone. Yes, you can send her along any time this week. I'll have it fixed up with our funny old Establishment Officer. He always does what I want him to. Oh, no, nothing like that—why, he must be well over fifty! But there's a rather melting look, you know. Well, bye-bye, Lydia, and be good. And thanks a lot."

CHAPTER VI

THE INNER MYSTERIES

THE dinner party consisted of John and Lady Eva Carstairs, Mr. Peppercorn, Lady Eva's friend, Mrs. Livingstone, the latter's daughter in the A.T.S., and Evelyn. It was a great success. Under the influence of good food, good wine, and good company, the Minister proved himself a social figure of a high order. He was indeed made for Mayfair and had been lost in Surbiton. In particular he told three or four most amusing stories based upon the muddles in the Ministry of Sustenance and the misfortunes of his dear friend and colleague, the Right Honourable Tobias Ramsbotham.

Lady Eva was at her best as a hostess. If her guests had anything to say she induced them to say it. She even succeeded in getting Evelyn to talk. She had a greater triumph still with Miss Bridget Livingstone, one of those Society girls whose minds appear to the outside

world to be completely barren, who are mulishly dumb in the presence of their elders and appear to regard them as vermin, fit only to be shot at sight. Even Bridget expanded a little, especially when she talked to Evelyn, though what she had to say would not have been worth listening to had she not been good looking. Evelyn could not have said whether he was more scared or attracted by her. Her mother, Mrs. Livingstone, wife of a pillar of the Chancery Bar, was much more entertaining. Mrs. Livingstone was quite a good talker, but something of a snob. It is generally supposed that snobs are people who parade their acquaintanceship with people with whom they have found contact difficult or even pretend to friendship with people whom they barely know. This is not always the case. Mrs. Livingstone had no difficulties in meeting people and knew most people who mattered. There is snobbery also at times among such social figures. In her case it took a subtle form. She never referred to anyone save by his or her Christian name and assumed that her hearers would realize whom she meant—or realize their own insignificance if they did not. When she talked of the exploits or views of Dickie, Eileen, Reginald, and Diana, the rest of the party felt that there could be no other personages with those names worthy of mention and therefore no possible confusion. Lady Eva realized that Reginald was a marquess but was befogged about the others. The rest of the party had no notion who any of them were but did their best to look as though they had.

Since John Carstairs was his usual shrewd, sensible, and slightly ironical self, it will be seen that the material of the party was good. There was no doubt, however, that Mr. Peppercorn was its life and soul.

Yet in these days even conversation considered good

will not bear the harsh test of being committed to paper. The age of great table-talk is over and that of our time is a poor substitute. There are also various codes which appear even less intelligible and more fatuous in writing than in speech, especially when several are mingled, as is the case when the circle is of mixed origins and interests. Thus Lady Eva, if faithfully chronicled, would be found to have uttered on several occasions phrases which ran somewhat like this: "I thought it was rather—you know, not quite—I mean——" and everyone would appear to follow her perfectly. Mrs. Livingstone remarked that Freddy was always more or less *there*, but she did not think he was likely to go much farther. Now if Jack, with his contacts, came in at the top level—— Bridget Livingstone, at least in her private conversation with Evelyn, beside whom she was seated and with whom she was soon on quite good terms, remarked that good things were "wizard" or "super" and bad things "foul". Let us not be so harsh as to record in cold print their several efforts to express themselves in a language of which none of them, not even Mr. Peppercorn, had a full command. Yet the substance of the Minister's talk towards the end of the meal interested at least the hero of this narrative, and if it be in itself worth reading then anything which interested him may be assumed to be so also. We may for the most part omit the contribution of the others to the conversation; for, though it was by no means a monologue by the Minister, his part provided the real substance.

John Carstairs had asked him whether there were any solid foundation for the reports of correspondents that Hitler was about to attack Russia. Mr. Peppercorn hesitated for a moment and then remarked that, though much that the Government knew or intended had to be

kept secret, he did not see why their strong suspicions should be concealed in this case. In fact, he understood that the Foreign Office was discreetly issuing some guidance on the subject. The Government thought that Hitler would attack Russia, and very soon at that. This statement was received with interest but, though not with incredulity, with a general unspoken reflection that the inspired prophecies of war-time were often unfulfilled, at least as regards the element of time.

Then, however, Mr. Peppercorn branched off into some remarks on the subject of Russia which succeeded in holding everyone's attention. He had been in the country on several occasions and had been particularly struck by the status of the commissars. They were all-powerful and yet comparatively modest and quiet in their way of life. They might of course have a better time behind the scenes than when they were in the spot-light, but he thought that a playboy among them would be given short shrift.

"Very different to Berlin," he said. "The Nazi playboy is very much in evidence. He doesn't worry who sees him and apparently nobody on top minds. A lovely Mercedes-Benz, lovely magnums of champagne—of course Ribbentrop imports that, so it's all in the family, so to speak—and lovely ladies." He made a slight gesture towards Bridget, as much as to say that he realized how grown-up she was. Bridget smiled scornfully, as much as to say that she felt sure he could not realize how grown-up she was.

Mr. Peppercorn went on to express his view that the Russian method and manner were to be preferred. It was, broadly speaking, that which this country was gradually adopting to meet the strain of war, when national differences were taken into account.

"What? Commissars?" asked John Carstairs.

"My dear sir, we're all of us commissars to-day," said Mr. Peppercorn, leaving Evelyn to wonder whether he himself were a commissar in embryo.

In time of war, Mr. Peppercorn pointed out, the country had to be run. You could not get away from the fact that the people needed running, and he was afraid they would still require it for a long time after the war was over. People in the mass were very like children in some respects. They had not only to be told what to do but also taught the meaning of events, as far, of course, as was consistent with security. There the Press could help. It generally did, but sometimes it got restive and thought it knew better than the people who were instructing it. That was why the public relations services had to be so tactful, why they must every now and then dish out little scraps of information "off the record", which kept the journalists sweet because it increased their importance and also provided them with a background. There was no better policy than that of giving away an unimportant secret or two.

Then there was Parliament. It too grew restive at times and had to be humoured. Strong parliamentarian and convinced democrat though he was, Mr. Peppercorn was forced to admit that the House of Commons took some managing in time of war. The House of Lords was easy except when Lord Stromboli was in eruption—the leader of the House could never risk a nap when there was any prospect of that. But the Commons were a danger all the time, because something might be said in a supplementary question which would put the speaker in the cooler if it were said in any other public place. Most members were wonderfully reasonable at bottom; for instance, old Stiggins, who used to ask such terrible supplementaries,

was now open to approach in advance, and when he put a question down would indicate how he intended to follow it up. From the point of view of business, however, he, Mr. Peppercorn, would be happier if Parliament would give the Government a freer hand in running the war, though he trusted he would not be quoted as saying so. He had not, he added, taken that attitude when he had been in opposition, but that was because a bad Government had then been in power, whereas now there was a good one. In short, Mr. Peppercorn was of opinion, a little patronizingly, that Parliament was a good thing, with interesting traditions. But it wanted watching. Decidedly it wanted watching.

At the worst it generally did as it was bidden in the long run. It was not half so troublesome as the Courts. All this stuff about guardianship of the nation's liberties was nonsense in war-time. The nation had to resign its liberties and trust to the common sense and good feeling of the Government to leave it as much of them as was safe. It could not guess which were most dangerous, and sometimes it could not even be told. Magna Carta and Habeas Corpus were fine things, but they had to be very much curtailed in war-time. And yet, said Mr. Peppercorn sadly, if his colleague Mr. Jenkins of the Ministry of Public Safety laid a pestilent Fascist by the heels the Courts were always ready to let him out again if they could find a loophole in the regulations. Fortunately, he too had good legal advice, and if the fellow were liberated by one door he could often take him up as he came out and pop him in again by another.

But the point was, you had to run a country in war-time on the commissar system. And the commissar should be a modest man, not flaunting his position, not taking advantage of it to get more advantages than he needed. But

advantages he had to have. A first-class secretariat, for example, so that he should not waste his time, and if other people went short, well, his time was more important than anybody's. Then, travel. He had to have his car and his petrol. If he made a long journey, he had to have first priority in the aircraft or the sleeping-car. "And I don't mind telling you," said Mr. Peppercorn, finishing his brandy and lighting his cigar, "that if there's no sleeping-car on the train when I go to Scotland at night, I have one put on." It might sound incredible, he added, but was none the less true, that a North Country bishop had appealed to the Ministry of Transportation to be put on the same standing as Assistant Secretaries in government offices for sleepers, so that he could do his travelling to London by night. What did he want to travel by night for? What did he want to travel to London at all for, if it came to that? Mr. Peppercorn hardly needed to tell them that the application was refused. Evelyn, remembering that in the matter of carpets he was graded as an Assistant Secretary and most anxious that no bishop should deprive him of a sleeper if he required one, made a sound like "humph!" which showed how just he considered the refusal to have been.

In short, said Mr. Peppercorn, the commissar had to be given just enough facilities to enable him to do his work, and no more. "But I admit these look big in war-time," he went on. "After all, what else is there? Money—the more you get the bigger the proportion the Chancellor takes. Housing—well, one man can't live in a bigger house than another man now because he can't get the staff to run it. My own flat's more swagger than the artisan's, I suppose, but the chief difference I see is that my block's called a 'court' and his is called a 'buildings'. Food and drink——" here Mr. Peppercorn tried to wave

away the waiter with the brandy bottle, who had advanced at a sign from John Carstairs, but was just too late to stop him and had to resign himself to drinking a second glass—"food and drink are evenly shared out all round. No, the contrast in war isn't so much between the rich man and the poor man as between the man who's always got transport at his disposal and the man who hasn't." Great care was taken, said Mr. Peppercorn, to keep down the privileges of the well-to-do who did not belong to the commissar class. For instance, he allowed any quantity of big fish-hooks for professional fishing to be made, but no small hooks for amateur trout-fishers, though they required practically no material. That was to keep aristocrats in their place and please the workers, who would thus be more lenient to the commissar.

The other respect, said Mr. Peppercorn, in which the commissar occupied a unique position was that he was told the truth. That was something to which no one else was entitled in time of war. The ladies present seemed to think that this was probably the greatest privilege of all, but that Mr. Peppercorn took leave to doubt. The truth after Dunkirk, he pointed out, could not be regarded as agreeable fare, and it was certainly not suited to the public stomach. The odds against the nation's survival must have been something like fifty to one. One could not say that they were much better than ten to one yet, though when Hitler attacked Russia they might come down. (John Carstairs remarked that if the Germans defeated the Russians we might be worse off, and then the odds would lengthen, but Mr. Peppercorn would not take so pessimistic a view).

But, went on Mr. Peppercorn, learning the truth also involved learning why things happen as they do; it was seldom for the reasons announced. But they missed quite

a lot of excitement because the most commonplace things were carefully dramatized for the public. That was, in Mr. Peppercorn's view, the sole way in which to maintain morale in difficult circumstances, by putting a bit of drama into the unpalatable or merely commonplace. Public relations services might be a nuisance sometimes—and he had to admit that the stuff put out by dear old Ramsbotham's chaps from the Ministry of Sustenance was often intolerable—but they were absolutely invaluable. He could not imagine what people would do without them.

John Carstairs suggested that they might sometimes think for themselves, but Mr. Peppercorn dismissed the notion with one of his famous sweeps of the arm. (He was becoming, thought Evelyn, almost oratorical over that second brandy.) It was, he averred, astonishing how few people could think for themselves. It was only a small proportion of the population, and it was necessary that the whole population should at least have some mental pabulum. People who could not think could still chew the end of ideas, and that kept them out of mischief and relatively contented. He was not indeed sure that it would be a good thing if they all thought for themselves. It might be unsettling. (Evelyn felt sure now that but for the second brandy he would not have been so engagingly frank even in the present sympathetic company.)

The guidance of opinion, thought Mr. Peppercorn, was one of the great arts of modern times. The Church of Rome was left far behind by the modern press and wireless experts. In peace-time it was, at all events in the democratic countries, merely a matter of dexterously and delicately heightening desirable effects—a touch here and a touch there. But in war one had to go farther. One had occasionally to construct. And he had to confess

that, as regards the activities of his own Ministry, he sometimes had difficulty in recognizing them at all when he heard or saw them described on the radio or in the daily press. Once, he said with a chuckle, he had actually sent for his public relations officer, Mr. Shick, to enquire whether he had not invented a feat which he saw attributed to the Ministry in one of the papers. But no, Shick showed him that it was, like the "true story" of the magazines, "genuinely founded on fact." They had a good laugh over that, he remembered. And the present company had a good laugh too.

Evelyn found himself wondering whether his own account of the distribution of monobelium would be recognizable by those concerned. He reflected, however, that it was for the Cabinet, which presumably took a rather more realistic view of things than the general public.

In time of peace, Mr. Peppercorn pointed out, it was notable how much the public and private utterances of certain classes of people differed—people such as politicians, lawyers, and journalists. But in time of war there was a gulf even wider between the public and private utterances of those who belonged to the commissar class. If they were the elect, they were also the disillusioned. They always saw the other side of the medal, and they could not avoid becoming cynical. While they talked from the platform of the lion-hearted courage of the citizens of this or that place in the "Blitz", they saw in their mind's eye the people who ran about or ran away like rabbits. When they announced that ten bombers had been unable to hit one of our destroyers, and that she had shot down three of them and driven off the rest, they knew that a near miss had loosened every plate in her and that she had limped back to port for a spell of

three months in dry dock. When they told of a wonderful new factory they realized that it would not be in full production for a year. If they put one word wrong and made a bad impression, that wrong word would echo round the world. The stigma would cling to them and undo the good impression which it had taken a year to create. It was a terrible deprivation, Mr. Peppercorn said with a sigh, to be denied an occasional indiscretion.

And, perhaps worst of all, when they had to "build up" some public figure, they knew in their hearts that he was only in his place either because no one better was to be found at the moment or because he had to be put in to keep somebody or some party sweet. He might be careless and inefficient in some respects; he might even be a bad father or a bad husband. Mr. Peppercorn smiled wryly as he reflected upon these drawbacks in the career of the commissar. Evelyn hazarded a guess that he was brooding over the shortcomings of his friend and colleague Mr. Ramsbotham and that only the kindness of his nature prevented him from holding that statesman up as an example of carelessness and inefficiency, perhaps even as a bad father or a bad husband.

Then, however, Mr. Peppercorn suddenly brightened, took his elbows off the table, washed his hands.

"Anyhow," he said, "it's a great thing to be in the service of the country in days like these—and in the know."

"Do you think," asked Lady Eva, "the commissar will survive the war?"

"I fear so. I fear so. For some time at all events. It will take a long time to get back to normal in that way—if we ever do."

They considered this prospect for a moment. Then

Lady Eva began feeling for her bag. But before she rose she fired one last question at Evelyn.

"Do you approve of the commissar system? Do you think it a good one?"

"I think," said Evelyn after a slight hesitation, "one's view would rather depend upon whether one were a commissar oneself."

CHAPTER VII

SETTLING DOWN

THE building which housed the Ministry of Armaments and Supply was becoming overcrowded, as is only natural in well-conducted ministries in wartime. Nevertheless, Thais secured another room. How she did it need not be asked. Few others could have done it, and certainly no one on the level of a private secretary. It is true that her own room was small, but there were others of the same size accommodating three persons. That would not do for her. She explained to Evelyn that she must have space to plan. So she got a third room and there installed two unpleasing women sent by the Ministry of Employment. What work they did in the next fortnight Evelyn was unable to determine. He once opened their door by mistake and found them knitting, but that might have been only for an idle quarter of an hour. He had no intention of investigating further. They scared him, the younger by a coy giggle, the elder by a positively menacing stare. However, the occupants of the third room were now part of his staff.

Thais informed him that they were just tolerably efficient and that she could manage them. He had no doubt that she could.

If, however, they had time for knitting during their first fortnight, he thought it improbable that this could be so in the second. During that period preparations for the memorandum on the next monthly allotments of monobelium were in full swing. Draft after draft was written, hacked to pieces, revised, rewritten. The telephone wires grew hot with conversations. A special messenger was on one occasion sent to South Wales with a questionnaire, and brought back the list of answers by the next return train. Evelyn himself travelled up to Glasgow—reserved first-class sleeper—to investigate a case which he found puzzling and which Thais decided must be cleared up in the national interests. The total amount of information obtained was very large, but Thais was accomplished in the art of condensation and knew that in these busy days few people, least of all ministers and officials, had time to read long documents. Finally it was all boiled down to ten typed pages.

Even then it was not ready for the printer. Mr. Plump-ton made a number of emendations which gave the memorandum a more formal and dignified air. Then he submitted it to the Minister, who took out Mr. Plump-ton's phrases and inserted a number of his own which made it livelier and better reading. Mr. Peppercorn was positively enthusiastic on the subject. He accorded Evelyn two long interviews in which he discussed every detail of the lay-out. He had many paragraphs shortened, remarking that one or two of his colleagues could not understand a paragraph of more than ten lines. At last the memorandum was printed; proofs were corrected;

and finally the copies arrived on tasteful pale-green paper. It was with no little pride that Evelyn took his own copy home and, since it was marked "very secret", stored it under the paper lining of the drawer in which he kept his shirts.

A few days later Mr. Peppercorn sent for him. As he entered the presence he saw that the Minister was in high good humour.

"Well, young feller," he said, "they took your memo., bait, hook, and sinker. It made no end of a good impression. Just look at this."

He handed Evelyn a copy scored and annotated in heavy black pencil. The first comment was rather damping. "A tendency here to official circumlocution, up with which I will not put," it ran. ("That was one of Plumpton's bits," said Mr. Peppercorn. "I ought to have had it out.") But at the bottom was written: "Very interesting and informative," followed by august initials. There could be no doubt that the memorandum had been a success. And it had gone into the archives. It was already part of history. Some day, when it became safe to allow the historians access to such mysteries, learned eyes would read it reverently.

"It's done the Ministry credit," said Mr. Peppercorn. "I could see Ramsbotham was jealous. He was very preoccupied after the Cabinet and hurried off. I expect he's going to publish a letter of thanks from one of the babies he provides condensed orange juice for. It's my belief some of it goes into their mothers' gin. But," he went on patronizingly, "we mustn't deny credit where credit's due. Perhaps we could do a bit ourselves in the publicity line." He picked up a telephone and asked for Mr. Shick.

"That you, Shick? You know all about the memo.

on monobelium? Yes, of course you do. Well, I think we could make something of it in your best style. Be reasonably discreet, but the Germans know all about it of course. I leave it to you if it's to be a general hand-out or for your special friends. But make it snappy and intimate. You—er—you needn't say *very* much about me, of course. You know I like to keep out of these things as far as possible. Yes, of course you realize that. But you can bring in Mr. Allardyce. No, don't bother to come up here; I've nothing to tell you. Mr. Allardyce will come round to your room. He'll be there in a minute. Good-bye."

"Shick's an excellent chap, but he talks a lot. I haven't time for him now. You go and see him. He's a good man to keep in with."

The Minister said these words impressively. It was almost like a trainer telling a friend a stable secret. Evelyn felt that he must indeed be high in favour. He inquired the way to Mr. Shick's room from the lift-man and went there straight away.

Mr. Shick was a dapper, bald-headed man wearing gold-rimmed spectacles. He might have been any age between forty and fifty and any nationality except pure English. His accent was as indefinable as his antecedents. In point of fact he was the son of an Austrian-Jewish father and a Welsh mother, had started life as a cub reporter in Cardiff and gravitated to London *via* Montreal. All this and much more Evelyn learnt from a long and, it need hardly be said, one-sided conversation which preceded the business in hand. Like an Irish horse-dealer, Mr. Shick would have thought it bad manners to go straight to that.

He was entertaining about his first job on a London evening paper. It was what was called "working the

pitch" of *The Jupiter*. That magnificent journal received free of charge in the form of letters to the Editor communications from the most eminent in the land who could have got twenty-five guineas or more for the same material from any other paper. It had been his task to get into touch with the writers of the most topical and interesting letters and persuade them to give him an interview or even talk to him on the telephone. If he were successful, there was naturally no need for an acknowledgement to *The Jupiter*. The piece could be put straight into "The Diary of a Man about Town" with some introduction such as: "When I saw Lord Tallboys yesterday I found him as interested as ever in——" Occasionally, however, the writer felt himself under an obligation to *The Jupiter*, and in that case the piece had to begin: "In a letter to *The Jupiter* Sir Stanislas Mulready brings up the question of——" That would mean failure and black looks for Mr. Shick.

The job had its variety. Sometimes the bald announcement that "a marriage has been arranged and will shortly take place" on the Court page of *The Jupiter* was in itself in the nature of a scoop. But there Mr. Shick was in his element. Whereas *The Jupiter* could but announce that these two persons were about to be joined together in holy matrimony, Mr. Shick would inform the world that the bride was celebrated for her *chic*, that she was known as "Polly" to her intimates—among whom there was half a hint that Mr. Shick was included—of her early work as a mannequin and her passion for sunbathing in the south of France. By the time he passed on to other work, Mr. Shick said modestly, he could turn out as pretty a matrimonial par as any man in Fleet Street.

"Now," he said, squaring his shoulders, "we'll get to

work on your affair. First of all, what school were you at? Eton or Harrow?"

"No, I was at Rugby," said Evelyn in some astonishment at this method of approach.

"Oh, that will do all right. Arnold and all that." Mr. Shick, who had himself been educated at an elementary school and had later attended night classes in Cardiff, and never dreamt of concealing the fact, set great store by Eton and Harrow, but was prepared to put up with Rugby.

Next Mr. Shick made a note of Evelyn's favourite sport, which was trout-fishing—he had been brought up in Devonshire where it is not the exclusive prerogative of the well-to-do, but from Mr. Shick's point of view it had an agreeably aristocratic suggestion. Mr. Shick seemed a little disappointed that he was not Lady Eva's cousin, but the name of John Carstairs was reasonably good copy. He glanced at Evelyn's black coat and striped trousers—just home and doing credit to the master-hand which had designed them—and jotted down in shorthand, "well dressed, with the sobriety of the man of affairs". He discovered and made a note of the fact that Evelyn had enlisted in the Border Guards early in the war, had gone back to his cousin's office while recovering from an operation for appendicitis, had then been reserved to attend to the business, and was for the time being a private in the Home Guard. ("Something about service always looks well when a man's young," said Mr. Shick. "Public doesn't so much like to hear of him otherwise. If he's done a bit of service one can say that all his thwarted energies have been put into the job of beating the Hun in the office since he's not allowed to fight him in battle.") Not a word was said about monobelium, and Evelyn concluded that, either it did not

matter or Mr. Shick knew all there was to be known about it.

He looked forward with interest to the results of the interview. Two days later he found the first-fruits in the form of a roneod foolscap sheet, heavily lined in red at top and bottom. At the top was written: "Not to be published, broadcast, or printed on club tapes before 09.00 hours, July 21st, i.e. for evening papers. Correspondents telegraphing this matter abroad must mention this embargo." Below came:

PEPPERCORN'S BACK-ROOM BOY
MONOBELIUM GOES TO WAR

Mr. Peppercorn has an eye for the right man for any job that is going. When it became necessary to make sure that every ounce of our precious "Monobelium for Victory" should go to the right hands, he found the only man in the country who could do it.

Monobelium is so rare that hardly anyone outside its production knows anything about it. If an outsider were brought in there would be delay while he found his feet. Less monobelium would be available for our machine-tools and the armour-plating of the tanks in which our boys are facing the Hun. The Hun would score.

It is said there is a genius in every line if you can only lay your hands upon him. Mr. Peppercorn found his genius at once.

It was Mr. Evelyn Allardyce, cousin of Mr. John Carstairs, the proprietor of monobelium.

Mr. Allardyce thinks monobelium, lives for monobelium. He knows what every foundry which uses it is doing and watches the changes in priorities with the eye of a hawk. Production and distribution of monobelium absorb all his interest.

You see, he was invalided out of the Border Guards to his great disgust, and all his thwarted energies have been put into the job of beating the Hun in the office since he's not allowed to fight him in battle. Happily he is fit again, but he cannot now be spared. He is irreplaceable.

Mr. Allardyce is twenty-eight, well-dressed, with the sobriety of the man of affairs. He was at Rugby, that forcing-ground of character where the influence of the great Arnold still broods over the future destinies of leaders in all walks of life.

In peace-time he was one of the most famous trout-fishers in Devonshire, but he has not had a chance of dropping a fly into the pools of his beloved Devon streams since the war. In fact he has scarcely left London since September 1939. New work is likely to fall upon his shoulders now that the Russians have asked us to spare a small consignment of monobelium for their new tank.

Mr. Allardyce's private secretary is Miss Thais MacNutt, who comes from Marlborough. She has a growing clerical staff and in view of the Russian demand has just engaged a Russian-speaking shorthand-typist, Miss Olga Popov.

Working for Mr. Allardyce, she says, is tremendously exciting, but rather a strain because he thinks so quickly and expects you to keep up with him. "It's like living in a whirlwind," she says, "and as for the hours, they're terrific. I can't call my soul my own. But it's a wonderful feeling to be doing something really worth while for our boys out there and I can't think of any job I'd change it for."

There followed a technical paragraph explaining, so far as the interests of security and Mr. Shick's knowledge of monobelium permitted, the nature and uses of the

precious mineral. To wind up there was another brief reference to the uncanny skill of Mr. Peppercorn for putting the right man in the right place and his encyclopædic knowledge of the vast number of products dealt with by his Ministry.

Mr. Peppercorn was pleased. Another man in his place might have been upset by the laudation of so subordinate a figure as Evelyn, but the Minister was generously minded. So long as he appeared as presiding genius, he was delighted that his officials should be buttered. It all went to the credit of the Ministry.

Ninety-five per cent of the copies of this document issued went straight into waste-paper baskets or on to the spikes which are used in some newspaper offices for the disposal of unused copy. (The sub-editor of *The Jupiter* thrust it on with such haste and violence that he spiked his finger.) But Mr. Shick's old evening paper published the article almost in full, and one or two provincials followed suit. The result was that Evelyn achieved fame in the course of a morning. This fame might be transient where the general public was concerned—all publicity agents will tell you that a lengthy process of "plugging" is needed to obtain more than that—but within the Ministry it was more solid. Hitherto he had been an unknown figure in this organization of many departments; now he was a personality. The male members of the staff sneered in some cases and one of them even made aspersions, as vile as they were unjustified, against Mr. Peppercorn's private morals. The women, after one glance at him, decided that the barest justice had been done by the article, but on the other hand they made considerable reservations on the subject of Thais. Even her friend, Myra Cuning, regrettable to record, spoke with some spite and acrimony on her

part in the affair and her relations with her chief. But there could be no doubt about it, both became famous. And in both cases the laurels were worn with becoming modesty.

One small incident remains to be mentioned in connexion with the article. On the morning on which it appeared Evelyn was rung up by a Mr. Twaddle of the Ministry of Propaganda with a request for some further material on the subject. Mr. Twaddle kindly offered to send round an emissary, but Evelyn replied that he happened to be lunching at the Castanet, one of the numerous agreeable little foreign restaurants off Tottenham Court Road, and that he would call upon Mr. Twaddle afterwards.

Mr. Twaddle proved to be head of the Section of Foreign Information. He desired to keep the outer world in touch with the progress of British war production and in particular to emphasize to the Turks and the Spaniards the advantages derived by this country from the monopoly of monobelium in the manufacture of weapons superior to those possessed by their adversaries. He called in a secretary who took down a number of points made by Evelyn in answer to a questionnaire. Evelyn was agreeably impressed to find that the information asked for was on the whole more to the point than that extracted from him by Mr. Shick. It contained nothing about Rugby or trout-fishing or Evelyn's clothes. Mr. Twaddle afterwards introduced Evelyn to the Turkish and Spanish Sub-sections.

The Turkish was small. It contained only four men, with a due allowance of clerical assistance. They were all in high fettle because an article produced by the Sub-section on the subject of the 25-pounder gun had just appeared in an Ankara newspaper. The Spanish

Sub-section was of greater importance, five seniors, five subordinates, and a clerical staff of eight. Its chief informed Evelyn that they were producing half a dozen articles a week. Evelyn asked politely where they all came from and was told that they were for the most part refugees from the present regime of General Franco. He expressed, innocently enough, some surprise that the Spanish newspapers, which he had always understood were under strict governmental control, should publish articles which they must be well aware were written by foes of the Falange.

"Oh," said the Spanish chief blithely, "they do not publish anything——"

Mr. Twaddle struck in hastily:

"So far we have not been able to get our articles into the Spanish Press. But we live in hopes, we live in hopes. Besides, these articles go to our Embassy in Madrid where they are most valuable, in various ways. And some are published in South American papers."

"One, in Chile," said the tactless Spaniard. Mr. Twaddle looked daggers, but said no more.

Evelyn thought it a little odd that eighteen men and women should be engaged in producing articles for the Spanish Press which the Spanish Press never published, but supposed it must be all right. He was not one to set up his opinions against men who were manifestly so much more clever than himself. He felt sorry, however, that the Spaniards under Franco's regime were not to hear about the advantages of monobelium.

That evening, as he was preparing to leave his desk for home, he was rung up by a Mr. Twiddle of the Ministry of Propaganda with a request for some further material on the subject. Bewildered, Evelyn replied that he had given it that morning.

"Oh, I don't think so," said Mr. Twiddle. "There must be some mistake. This is the Section of European Information."

"But—but—I told all I knew to the Section of Foreign Information. Isn't that the same thing?"

"Oh dear! Oh dear!" said the voice. "The same mistake has happened before. I believe there is a Section of Foreign Information"—the voice was very scornful now—"but I've never come across it. However, as I say, we are the Section of European Information, the real thing, if I may say so."

"And have you got Spanish and Turkish Sub-sections?"

"Yes, we have, and I'd like to introduce you to them. But however did you know that?"

"Oh," said Evelyn, "I just thought that it was likely."

CHAPTER VIII

FETTERS OF LOVE

ON the maps of Russia the arrows were approaching Leningrad, Smolensk, Kiev, and Odessa. The Germans had announced that the Russian armies were a disorganized mass. They claimed prisoners by the hundred thousand. The Military Correspondent of *The Jupiter* wrote of lines of operations, of pincers great and small, of the friction of war, and of the theory known as "the diminishing force of the offensive". Yet, if there were any diminution in the force of the German offensive it was not yet noticeable. Photographs appeared

of Marshal Budyonny with his great moustache and of a new figure of comforting solidity called Timoshenko, but neither seemed to be able to halt the Germans. Yet the Russians kept on fighting and there was no armistice, which was an innovation striking and comforting to British public opinion.

The campaign seemed to have removed the possibility of an invasion of the British Isles. Some people dared to say, though diffidently lest they should appear selfish and unfeeling, that the war in Russia was at least an asset from one point of view. The more pessimistic promptly pointed out that a complete German victory would put us in a worse situation than we had been in before, because before there had been a great Russian army in being and undefeated, which imposed a certain respect upon Germany by its mere existence, whereas if that army were put out of action the Germans would be able to turn their backs upon Russia with an easy mind. It was remarkable how the national attitude to Russia changed. Evelyn noticed that his mother, who used to speak of "those Russians" and "poor old Finland", now spoke of "poor old Russia" and "those Finns". Lady O'Hara, it is true, showed a certain cynicism about this change-over, but then she belonged to that trying race which refuses to look at things as others see them, which makes a point of not conforming to accepted opinion—especially English opinion—which always says the words better left unsaid, and which constitutes the *enfant terrible* of international society. However, neither Mrs. Allardyce in particular nor England in general allowed themselves to be influenced by Irish unconventionality or the length of Irish memories, though they evinced some embarrassment when these were paraded before their eyes.

The two ladies occasionally had sharp words on the subject, but they remained the best of friends. In fact, they presently decided to go down to Cornwall together for a short holiday. This left Evelyn to his own resources. An elderly charwoman prepared his breakfast, but he had to dine out. Mr. Peppercorn, whose affability where he was concerned could not have been exceeded, put him up for the Macclesfield Club. He dined several times a week in those pleasant basement quarters, where a white-clad woman chef stood over sizzling cutlets and portions of steak—lamentably small now but still better than anywhere else—on an open grill and the members carried their glasses of port from the dining-room to the sitting-room so that others could take their places. It was delightful, the ideal club, the only perfect club in London, a club where everyone, whatever his type, peer, politician, sportsman, business man, soldier, civil servant, seemed to have the merit, the supreme merit, of being at once very civilized and very insularly English. Yet, delightful as was the Macclesfield, its members of Evelyn's age were engaged upon tasks more arduous than, and almost as important as, the distribution of monobelium, tasks which seldom permitted them to spend a night in London—and the Macclesfield opened only for dinner. So, once or twice a week, he betook himself to resorts of brighter colour, the Virginia Creeper, for example. And what could be more natural than that he should invite his hard-working assistant, Thais, to keep him company on these lighter occasions?

The consequences were inevitable. They would have arrived more quickly with almost any one else than Evelyn, to whom nothing ever happened very quickly. Once or twice he had noticed on the countenance of Thais, as she sat beside him at table, the observed of all

beholders, an expression of bewilderment. The poor girl was, indeed, frankly bewildered.

"You know," she said to Myra Cunning, in whom she had found herself compelled to confide to some extent, with that longing for sympathy in matters of sentiment which is one of the distinguishing marks between female and male psychology, "you know, I don't quite see how it's all going to work out. I'm not sure I see how I want it to work out. Perhaps it would be better if things went on as they are, but I don't quite see how they can."

"It doesn't seem likely," said Myra.

"He's obviously very much attracted, but he never gets any forrader."

"Not much initiative," said Myra.

"No, and in a way that's one of the nicest things about him. There's such a lot of initiative in most men nowadays."

"You're telling me!" said Myra.

"But affairs in the office are a mistake, as you know."

"I don't see why you should say I know specially," said Myra.

"Oh, I mean on principle."

"Yes, they are on principle. Well, it seems to me there are only two alternatives: either you go a little further or you go a little back," said Myra.

"And how do I go back, if you please?"

"By not going out to dinner with him," said Myra.

"Oh, for goodness sake be reasonable!" said Thais tartly. "I mean to say—well, there are limits to the sacrifices one can make."

"Of course, if it's a sacrifice——" said Myra.

"Well, I shall have to give it a bit more consideration, that's all."

"Give what consideration?" asked Myra.

"Whether, as you elegantly put it, I go a little further or go a little back."

"That's always worth doing. But I've got a little private bet on the subject," said Myra.

"Have you? Darling, I wish you'd keep your beastly bets to yourself."

"Darling, I am keeping them to myself," said Myra.

"Darling, I don't see what you want to make them at all for, even with yourself. It's my affair, isn't it?"

"Yes, darling, it is your affair, very much your affair. Oh yes, it's your affair all right," said Myra. And she departed humming a song then popular:

"I had an affair, a lovely affair."

The comment of Thais was a word of a single syllable, pronounced without opening the teeth but with much use of the lips.

She had not much time for the reflection she had promised herself, since that very evening she dined with Evelyn at the Grill Parisien in Jermyn Street. It was a meal quite different from those which had preceded it. Their waiter, a black-jowled Provençal with the authentic spirit of Eros in an unlovely exterior, was distressed that the best-looking couple in the restaurant should appear so indifferent to each other. They did not quarrel, but they spoke only in monosyllables. Both seemed distraught and on edge. He decided that there must have been a quarrel recently. He did his best, picked the best *gateaux* on the dish, and gave them an extra one apiece. He was rewarded by a beaming smile from Thais, but he would cheerfully have accepted a curse if she would but have conferred it upon her partner. Not even Evelyn's generous tip consoled him, but he supposed it would all come right in the end.

"Lorsque ça sera couché," he observed to a colleague, "ça oubliera bien vite la petite querelle. Pas de rouspétance entre deux draps!"

In ignorance, fortunately, of this licentious comment, Thais and Evelyn reached the door, to find the rain coming down in torrents. Both ejaculated "Blast" simultaneously. As Thais often said, the only crab about her home in Chelsea was its inaccessibility. There was not much hope of a taxi. And then, just as they were saying so, again simultaneously and with equal sullenness, a taxi drove up with a couple coming to dine late. The driver condescended to take them to Chelsea, though Evelyn expressed some doubt as to what he would say when asked to drive on to St. John's Wood.

Tempers, in both cases laid on like gas to-night, subsided as rapidly as they had flared up. They got in. Yet still some constraint lay upon them. Evelyn in particular was ill at ease. Turning out of Jermyn Street, the driver put the near back wheel over the kerb. Thais was pitched into Evelyn's arms, and there she stayed.

It has been said that Evelyn was not strong on the point of initiative, but a false notion of his character will have been conveyed if it has been supposed that he was in any way lacking in the instincts of a normal and healthy young man. If Thais had had any doubts about the matter she was speedily and delightfully undeceived. The hug, the kisses, and the endearments were as satisfactory as she could have hoped for in her most blissful imaginings; indeed, at moments they threatened to go beyond these.

"Oh, Evelyn," she murmured when momentarily she had recovered her breath, "I wondered if this would ever happen."

"So did I. But I was quite scared by the idea. It seemed too good to be true."

"You needn't have been scared. It might have happened as far as I was concerned the first day I saw you."

"Then I'm sorry we wasted such a lot of time."

"Yes, it does seem a waste. Still, we're fairly young, thank goodness."

"And now we can make up for the lost time."

"You seem to be in a hurry—Oh, Evelyn!"

They they realized that the taxi had stopped, and both again said "Blast!" The best taxi-rides always end too soon, whereas the uninteresting ones seem to be interminable.

But at the door the taximan shook his head decisively over the prospect of driving to St. John's Wood. He declared he had only a little petrol left and must head in the direction of his garage at Ealing. He and Evelyn engaged in calculations as to the possibility of reaching a tube station which would put the latter on to some section of the network suitable for his journey home. They made little progress. At last Thais called impatiently from the doorway:

"Oh, pay him off, Evelyn, and come and have a cup of coffee!"

Evelyn obeyed with alacrity. He looked with curiosity at the bed-sitting room, designated a "flatlet" because it had attached to it a kitchenette in one cupboard and a bath in another. He had expected order and tidiness because they were in accordance with the habits of the occupier, but was agreeably surprised by the charm of the place. He walked over to a bookcase.

"I say," he called, "you've got some lovely books."

"Left-overs of tastes of my 'teens. Don't read them now," called back Thais, bending over the coffee-pot.

She did not feel in the mood to do her stuff about her books in the accepted manner.

They were both thoroughly prim and proper as they sat down to coffee and cigarettes. The incident of the taxi might never have occurred. They might even have been husband and wife, so matter-of-fact were they. And this state of affairs might have continued for some time since, as has been said, Evelyn needed a spur before he became forthcoming. He obtained it when Thais came over and sat upon his knee. Then he acted in a manner calculated to please any girl and which pleased her vastly. Their conversation became of that infantile character which the most intelligent persons assume under the influence of love. Thais decided that he was the perfect lover. Yet she had the unusual power of looking at herself even when under the stress of emotion, and she could not avoid a sentiment of wonderment that she should find herself so completely overcome. She reflected that after the first occasion when she had met Evelyn she had accused herself of being a disgrace to her own principles. Never had she been so false to them as now. Her protective armour had fallen off, leaving her defenceless.

Sitting upon a lover's knee is pleasant for a time, but unless the lover be fat it is not comfortable for long—and Thais would not have had her lover fat even for the cosiness of a soft lap; that is a consideration for pugs and Pekinese, not for women. Presently she got up to do the black-out, then fetched a cushion and sat at his feet. They hardly spoke at all now. Occasionally a word or two came from Thais. They were fatuous enough, it must be admitted, but to Evelyn they seemed to drip from her mouth as honey from the honeycomb. He himself, whose conversation was limited at all times,

found he had nothing more to say except "Darling!" every now and then. With this, however, she found no fault.

The clock ticked on, but they heeded it not. All over London people away from their homes were thinking of last trains, tubes, and buses with the anxiety which is a product of wartime, but they were not of the company of the anxious. Hours and transportation alike had ceased to count. At last they fell completely silent. They were both, to tell the truth, a little sleepy.

Suddenly a thought struck Evelyn.

"What will it be like to-morrow morning at the office after all this?"

"Just the same as ever, outside. Evelyn, you must promise me that."

"Yes, outside. But inside it will be different."

"Yes, inside it will be different."

Suddenly, in an uncontrollable fit of candour, she began to speak of an episode in her past life. There had been a man, a young soldier, a gunner stationed at Larkhill in the first year of the war, when she had been on holiday at Marlborough. They had danced and ridden on the downs together. She had begun to fancy herself very much in love—or so she put it, but fancying oneself in love is, of course, being in love, at least temporarily. And then, she said, she had received a shock which she had never quite got over. It had made her hard. It had almost spoiled all faith she had ever had in men.

Evelyn murmured something sympathetic, and then asked innocently what had been the nature of the shock. At first she would not say. Then she blurted out:

"He wanted me to sleep with him."

Evelyn said, "How awful, Thais!" and felt how much

he would like to be able to hit the ruffian, not so much for his aspirations at the time as because the memory of them was distressing his loved one so greatly. But he could think of nothing more to say, so contented himself with the excellent step of kissing her hair. Thais also remained silent for some time. Then she remarked in the well-tried but unavoidable phrase:

"I wasn't that sort of girl."

"I'm sure you weren't, darling," said Evelyn fervently, fiercely expelling the inappropriate thought which for a moment had insinuated itself, the question whether or not he wished she had been. He put it away with shame. Thais was sobbing.

"No," she said at length. "And I'd like to tell you now that I've never in my life slept with anyone except the head of my department. Never."

Evelyn jumped slightly at this development. He wondered whether sleeping with the head of the department were a sort of rite, like the curtsy dropped by women when shaking hands with a royal princess or turning money when seeing the new moon. He wished he knew more of social customs. He had lived too cloistered a life, without looking about him enough. His mind scrambled and slithered painfully round this curious phenomenon. Yet, slowly though it habitually worked, it seldom failed to reach a logical conclusion in the end and sometimes got there quicker than more agile minds.

"I'm sure you never have, darling," he said, "and that you wouldn't do such a thing. But I was just wondering—Don't you think our show is practically a department?"

"It seems to be becoming one," said Thais, "quicker and quicker."

The last bus and the last tube train had gone.

CHAPTER IX

BREAKFAST FOR TWO

THIS is a short chapter, for which the excuse must be that it is about breakfast, a short meal. The cruder mind misses the charm of domesticity in love, while the more refined and subtle mind finds in it a peculiar delight. As Evelyn sat at table next morning and watched Thais bending over a frying-pan, from which came a pleasant sizzling noise and an appetizing smell, he decided that earth had little more to offer in the way of happiness. Then the kettle boiled. She lowered the gas under the frying-pan, filled the tea-pot, and brought it over to the table. He promptly rose and enfolded her in his arms, and the bacon would have been ruined if she had not recovered consciousness, after an embrace lasting a full two minutes. Even as it was they burnt the first two slices of bread in the electric toaster as black as his shoes.

It is pleasant to see the beloved drinking champagne and eating roast pheasant at midnight, but when two people have fallen in love deeply and recently—which in this naughty world may well be much the same thing—breakfast as a meal takes a great deal of beating, especially when the mistress prepares it with her own sweet hands. There has entered into the woman's passion an element of the maternal which envelops the whole affair in an atmosphere of delicious sentiment. She is determined to send her darling forth well-fortified to meet the world and, moved perhaps unconsciously by an uneasy feeling

that recent embraces may have sapped his strength, to make such amends as may lie in a good breakfast.

She will not let him stir a finger. Five years later—yes. Then she may remind him somewhat sharply that she has not three hands and would be glad if he would put the cups on the table, open a new pot of marmalade, and cut some small pieces of bread to fry with the bacon. Then romance will flee, as it always does when a lover ceases to be waited on by his lady. But not now. Now she was his handmaiden. As she watched him eat, her eyes, her lovely eyes, clouded with tears of tenderness. It was all he could do to persuade her to eat something herself. When they had finished they kissed once again,

Such kisses as belong to early days,
When heart, and soul, and sense, in concert move,
And the blood's lava, and the pulse a blaze,
Each kiss a heart-quake—for a kiss's strength,
I think it must be reckon'd by its length.

Being modern young people, they did not know their Byron—Thais, in fact, read only alleged poetry which looked and sounded like algebraic formulæ—but he met their case.

Evelyn was moved to an attempt to express some of the truths set forth above, but, haltingly as they have been described, his own version was still less adequate. He told her that having breakfast with her was lovely. It sufficed. Love makes its own poems, more luscious and passionate than Byron's or Solomon's, its own cadenced and high-coloured prose, its own rapturous music. Indeed spirits which are better than the gross average are themselves instruments on which Nature plays the music of love as a breeze plays on the Aeolian harp.

"Darling, I know, it's wonderful," said Thais. "I simply can't believe that we're both here having breakfast together. Two at breakfast, instead of being twice as happy as one, are a million times as happy. Geometrical progression isn't in it."

"Sympathetic progression, perhaps," said Evelyn, a very fair witticism for him, which was duly applauded.

"I wish——" he said a little later. "I wish——" and stopped.

Thais sighed. She knew what was coming.

"I wish we could always have breakfast together."

"But it wouldn't always be like this."

"I feel it would always be wonderful. Thais, can't we try? Will you marry me?"

"That's just like a man!" said Thais sadly but tenderly. "They want such a lot that they spoil everything. They're terribly unfair to women. If we give them an inch they take an ell. They think women are made only to yield to them. No, darling Evelyn, you're asking too much. I'm not going to yield to you. I'm going to stick to my principles. Now do be kind and sensible and let's just be friends. Don't tempt me any more, and don't spoil things by dragging in sex."

"You're very hard, Thais," said Evelyn, "but I will try to restrain myself. Only, if we can't have breakfast together always, we must sometimes."

"Oh, that's another thing," said Thais. "That's reasonable. I love you when you're reasonable and not grasping and lustful. Will you have one more cup of tea?"

Then she pushed him forth to catch a 19 'bus in the King's Road because there was a certain prejudice at the Ministry against men and women arriving together in the morning.

He went out musing upon the selfishness of women, even the sweetest and most loving of women. But presently the memory of that breakfast suffused his brain and healed the raw edges of his thwarted hopes. As long as he lived that would remain with him. And if ever he were to break forth into love poetry, which seemed unlikely just now, the scene would not be the ball-room or the shore or the open heath or any of those in which poets commonly set their amorous rhapsodies, but breakfast, with the beloved always within reach of a kiss, her skin like a June rose-leaf after her bath, but her eyes still a little heavy with love and sleep—the Angel at the Breakfast-table, perhaps.

CHAPTER X

THE RIVALS

WHEN Thais reached the office the first person she met on her own floor was her friend Myra. Her friend bid her good morning, looked at her closely, opened her handbag, took out half a crown, passed it from one hand to another, and then put it back. When the eyebrows of Thais framed a question, Myra said:

“Oh, nothing. I was just paying a bet I made with myself yesterday.”

“Darling,” said Thais, “I’m sure it’s a wonderful joke, or else you wouldn’t make it because you’re so humorous. But I’m not really humorous, I’m afraid, and I can’t see it.”

“I’m not really humorous either, darling, and it’s a

poor little private joke, not worth explaining." And she passed on, smiling spitefully.

Thais went to her room with a glint in her eye, which, however, softened as through the half-closed door she saw Evelyn's fair head bent over his desk. She "came over all soppy", as she put it to herself, and she found such a frame of mind ill adapted to work. She had another distraction to cope with: she was puzzled about Myra. In the ordinary way Myra did not go in for irony and was the least catty of girls. When you confided in her you could always be sure of sympathy; if offended, she forgave readily enough. Now her mocking attitude amounted almost to hostility. What could possibly have come over her? Well, if she wanted a fight she should have it.

But no, Thais was not of a quarrelsome disposition either, and to-day she was, for good and sufficient reason, feeling exceptionally tender-hearted. Suddenly she decided to go round to Myra's room and, without humiliating herself, make her peace, if that were possible.

To her astonishment, she found another girl, whom she knew but slightly, at Myra's desk.

"Hullo, Miss Warble. What's happened to Myra Cunning?"

"I've taken over her job. Didn't you know?"

"Not the slightest notion. Where's she gone?"

"Haven't you heard? It's the great excitement. She's private secretary to Hildebrand."

"Hildebrand?"

"Yes, Hildebrand Arundel."

"Not the V.C.? That's terrific. But I haven't heard a word about this."

"You know he was horribly wounded when he got his V.C. in North Africa. Well, they brought him in here

after he was stood down, and Myra Cunning is his private secretary."

"Terrific! And what does he do?"

"Controls the supply of paint for the Navy."

"Is that difficult?"

"They say it is. I'm told he can only just read and write, but I expect Myra manages it all."

"Oh, she does, does she. Curiouser and curiouser. And what's he like?"

"So good-looking he doesn't seem real. Did you ever see a reproduction of Raphael's 'portrait of a young man' at Budapest?"

Thais had not, but thought she could imagine it.

"Well, he's even more beautiful than that."

"Thank you. This is interesting, very interesting indeed."

Thais returned to her own room in thoughtful mood. It might be all more innocent than it sounded, but she could not avoid the suspicion that these were deep waters. There would have to be a fight after all. She braced her shoulders. If Myra thought she was going to run a successful rival to Evelyn she would find herself mistaken. She felt capable of cutting Hildebrand's throat if the necessity should arise.

She forgot the matter for a time in the press of work. She had Miss Olga Popov, her new Russian-speaking recruit, to look after, and that was a problem in itself. Miss Popov was temperamental and, though a British subject and the child of "White" parents, had become, under the emotion caused by the disastrous events in Russia, a "Red" of brightest hue. This would not have greatly mattered had she not taken to making what amounted to stump speeches in the office and to hurling bitter reproaches at her colleagues because Britain was

not in her estimation doing enough for Russia. Evelyn suggested arguments to appease her, but Thais was not an appeaser. Love and politics must be, in her view, banished from the office. She sometimes thought that love ought to be banished from life altogether, but then it gave men so much pleasure and it seemed selfish to deny them this. One of the sex at all events was a dear. But politics always led to trouble and there could be no argument about them. Her ruling was, "I won't have them in any shape or form." To Evelyn's surprise the fiery Slav, after a few storms, bowed to the verdict. He began to wonder what would happen if he and Thais found themselves in disagreement.

There were other distractions which showed that the management of even a staff of three—grossly inadequate as she had already decided it to be—was not an easy matter. They wanted to make tea in the middle of the morning. She, who had never herself succumbed to this vice, would not hear of its introduction. There was a sharp struggle, but she won again, and even succeeded in the still harder task of gaining her point in an atmosphere of good temper.

Worst of all—or at all events most distracting of all—there was love. It was all very well to say it must be banished from the office; it could not be banished from her bosom, and unfortunately that had to accompany her to the office. It came over her like an attack of influenza, to which, indeed, it bears a certain resemblance in its critical stage. She certainly had a high temperature, and everyone knows how hard it is to work when in this state.

Nevertheless Thais kept her weather eye lifting, and within a few days it noted a paragraph in an evening paper—Mr. Shick's old evening paper—headed "V.C.

minds the Paint". It mentioned, as in the case of the article on monobelium, the uncanny gift of Mr. Peppercorn for finding the men to fit the job, and remarked upon the military importance of paint, especially for camouflage, upon the magnificent war record of Captain Hildebrand Arundel, and upon his qualities as a business man. To the great pleasure of Thais it did not, however, allude to his private secretary, Miss Myra Cunning, or even to the fact that he had a private secretary. It was not one-third of the length of the monobelium article. There were not such great possibilities about paint, and the subject was unsuited to a memorandum for the information of the Cabinet. Thais decided that this attack, though it would have to be watched, was on a frontage too narrow for strategic success and that the penetration had not been deep enough to breach her main line of resistance. But it would certainly have to be watched; it must not be allowed to develop by infiltration if that could be avoided. Evelyn had not got a V.C., and she could think of no secret weapon equally effective.

She began by harassing the enemy's lines of communication. She rang up Lydia Skittish at the Ministry of Employment and reminded her that she had always promised to give her a hint if any ramp in the realm of clerical assistance should come to her notice. She knew how hard-pressed Lydia was. She herself had kept her demands down to the minimum. One might not be a saint, but one did feel a bit sick with humanity when one heard of a branch which had practically no work to do trying to enlist further staff so that it could cut a dash. If there came a demand for a typist for the Paint Sub-Section she suggested that the ordinary machinery of delay might be put into operation.

A few days later her old friend the Establishment Officer told her that the Ministry of Employment was cutting up rough about the question of an assistant for Miss Myra Cunning. They had sent a form with a dozen questions to be filled in and a covering note stressing the need for economy. He could not quite understand it.

"They never played games like that with you, my dear," he said, and gave her just the slightest pinch on the arm.

It was friendly, almost paternal. And the arm was all very well, but Thais knew where that led to. She moved a step further away. Ah, but her demands, she said, were not a ramp. Myra's? Well, Myra was about her best friend, so she would not guarantee that it was a ramp, certainly not that it was on her part; Captain Arundel might be the one with great ideas. The Establishment Officer looked doubtful, but said no more. Realizing that there was no prospect of pinching anything beyond the arm of Thais, he sighed and passed on.

Three days afterwards, learning that the desired recruit had not arrived, she wrote a memorandum, "Miss Mac-Nutt to Miss Cunning", to the effect that she had heard of the *contretemps* and could spare a typist for two hours each afternoon if the need were great. She awaited the reply with interest, but none came. Nor did the recruit. Thais bought a bunch of carnations and took them round herself to the room of the Establishment Officer. She also gave him a beaming smile whenever they met. Neither again alluded to the subject of their conversation.

She did not, however, make the mistake of supposing that Myra was done with. Presently a memorandum was circulated which described an agreement reached with the Ministry of Commerce on a limitation in the

shades of paint which might be put on sale. In the interests of economy they were to be limited to eleven, though permission for firms to mix them might be obtained on application to the proper department (in triplicate on the prescribed form, A.G. (Paint) B.2.541 y 2).

It was stated that this arrangement had been reached on the initiative of Captain H. Arundel, V.C., Paint Sub-section, who had pointed out its necessity to the Ministry of Commerce, and had held a series of conferences with the appropriate officials there. Thais learnt from Mr. Peppercorn's second private secretary that he had initialled the memorandum "very good work".

Things were becoming more serious. People were beginning to talk. The hostile progress was still of no great strategic significance, but it was a sign that the enemy was seeking the initiative by all the means in his power. Thais reflected gravely. Should she make a counter-demonstration? She decided against what might be only a frittering away of resources while the situation remained far from clear. The obvious measure was to deal a decisive blow which would end the menace once and for all. At present she could not see how this was to be done. But she would stand upon her guard with her reserves in hand just a little longer.

During all this time she had never laid eyes upon Hildebrand Arundel. Then one afternoon, returning from luncheon, she found herself sharing the lift with a tall, dark young man who leant upon a heavy ash stick. His extraordinary personal beauty left her in no doubt as to his identity. He radiated an unconscious charm which she found entrancing. She got out on his floor, which was the one below her own, and they stood for a few minutes in conversation.

She spoke of the bus she had missed because it dashed

off before she could jump on to it and of the increasingly bad manners of bus-drivers and conductors. To her surprise, he burst out into a fervent defence. He was sure the general public did not realize the strain to which they were being subjected. Everyone was overstrung, he said, but it was the working man and woman who were having the worst time of it. The miners now—imagine what it was to go on toiling underground with all the fittest and best men called up for the Services, with those that were left getting older and older. And then the grocers' assistants, toiling after hours and sometimes on Sundays to get the ration coupons sorted. No wonder they were in a bad temper on Mondays. Thais reflected that here was genuine imagination, the power to put oneself in another's place, which was no less pleasant than it was uncommon. Of course a delightful voice, expressive eyes, and hair which grew so prettily that you wanted to stroke it added to the effect.

She did not again encounter Captain Hildebrand Arundel for some time, but she was not allowed to forget his existence. It was recalled to her forcibly by an article in one of the morning newspapers which dealt with a limitation in the number of dyes to be used in clothing. They were to be reduced, she learnt, to about one-fifth of those in use by the trade in pre-war days.

The writer dealt learnedly with the former fifteen shades of mauve which had now come down to three and of the influence of this "austerity" rule upon feminine complexions. She lamented the abolition of the popular "London tan", and "Monte Carlo tan", for which "sun tan" was but an indifferent substitute. She branched off into social speculation. In a world where all worked, she opined that these small distinctions hardly mattered. Women could be smart in simplicity, and she assured

her feminine readers, apparently from the depths of experience, that men liked them all the better for it. ("I thought it would come to that soon," said Thais to herself with a grimace. "If it interferes with love it's a bad thing. Therefore there must be proof that it doesn't interfere with love. What a nuisance love can be! But anyhow there's this to be said for it, it's about the one thing they can't organize or ration. Or can they?") She toyed for a moment with the idea of a Ministry of Love, but came to the conclusion that the difficulties of starting it would be insuperable. A pity, because Evelyn as Director-General and Hildebrand Arundel as Deputy would look well.

So far the article had been the usual balderdash, but innocuous. The sting was in the tail. The article ended with the announcement that these plans had been worked out by the branch of the Ministry of Commerce which had drawn up the regulations for the limitation of the shades of paint. In the interests of economy in manpower it had been decided that one branch could deal with the kindred subjects of paints and dyes. And it had so happened, said the final paragraph, that Captain Hildebrand Arundel, V.C., of the Ministry of Armaments and Supply, who had given invaluable assistance in the matter of paint, had also proved to be an authority on dyes. He had taken the greatest interest in the woman's point of view and was an expert in what women wanted.

"I'll bet he is!" said Thais savagely. "He couldn't very well help it, poor dear. But this has gone far enough. It must be stopped. The time has come for action."

That evening she met Hildebrand Arundel going home—a meeting which she had taken some trouble to contrive—and turned upon him a battery which he found much more deadly than Rommel's machine-gun fire. He

promptly invited her to dinner, and she as promptly accepted. As it was already after seven o'clock they walked straight to the Carlton, slowly because Captain Arundel hobbled a little from the effect of his wound—or one of his several wounds—and leant upon his stick. Thais took his arm when crossing Piccadilly and, where another man of his age would probably have protested that he needed no help, he thanked her with his charming and gentle smile.

They found a table in the grill room. Then Thais received a shock. Before they were half-way through their soup, who should enter but Evelyn, with his cousin, John Carstairs. She bowed and smiled.

"That's my chief," she told her companion.

"What, Allardyce? By Jove, I never imagined he was so young! He's supposed to be an absolute wizard at organization, isn't he? I've heard people say he's one of the bright lights of the whole Ministry. It must be terribly exciting working with him."

Thais replied that she found it very exciting. She had experienced a moment's fright on first catching sight of Evelyn. This was now being succeeded by a slight pique because, after a friendly smile, he was taking no notice of her whatever. He might at least, she thought, have looked a bit surprised, or even a bit jealous. But there he was, taking it for granted that she should be dining with a V.C. of surpassing charm, and chatting to his cousin as if she did not exist. Though she did not know it, the conversation concerned her for a few moments.

"Devilish pretty girl!" said John Carstairs.

"Yes, she is easy to look at, isn't she. She's my private secretary."

"Is she, by Jove? And who's the man?"

"I don't know," said Evelyn, who had been untouched

by the drama going on about him and which so nearly concerned him. He was unaware even of the presence of Captain Arundel in the office.

"Hm. Well, he's a good looker too."

"Yes, so he is. I hadn't noticed."

"I gather then," said John Carstairs with a sly smile, "you're not jealous."

"Jealous? I hadn't thought of that. No, I don't think I am."

John Carstairs said no more, but he looked with interest at Thais and then back at Evelyn, wondering whether he would ever fathom his cousin, supposing that there was anything to fathom. Evelyn continued to enjoy his dinner without being outwardly troubled by the slightest pang of jealousy, a fact which Thais continued to note with disapproval.

Her veiled study of her lover did not prevent her from paying attention to her host, who was more talkative than Evelyn. He told her sadly that he had that morning been before a medical board and that he would not be allowed to return to the army. He was to be invalided out, and the prospect saddened his gallant heart. She sympathized, and sympathy from Thais could be precious balm. She inquired if he were likely to remain in the Ministry for the duration, and barely saved herself from a start of joyful excitement when he replied that he hoped not.

He had, he told her, been thinking of the future seriously since the morning. Before the board's verdict had been given against him he had been hoping against hope that he might one day rejoin his regiment. Now he was wondering whether he would stand any chance of getting into Parliament. His father, it appeared, was a stockbroker and not destitute of money.

"I should think you were just the sort of person the House of Commons wanted to-day. It's getting very old and stuffy, isn't it. I suppose you would want to go in as a Labour man," said Thais, recalling her last conversation with him.

She learnt that this was so, and gracefully expressed her sympathy with Labour aspirations. The conversation passed on to other matters, but the orderly mind of Thais had card-indexed all the information she had received. You never knew when such things would come in handy.

Captain Arundel saw her home in a taxi. He was of a more enterprising disposition than Evelyn, and the journey ended with a chaste—a relatively chaste—salute. It gave Thais satisfaction in more than one respect, one being that she considered this was deservedly due to Myra Cunning. But they parted on the doorstep.

It is regrettable to have to record that for some days thereafter Evelyn found himself neglected and dined regularly with his mother, now returned from her holiday. Thais bought that well-known advanced weekly paper, *The Soap-box*, which had just completed one of the most remarkable acrobatic feats in the history of journalism; for, having previously criticized with great bitterness the "capitalist" war, it had suddenly discovered, since the entry of Russia into the struggle, that it was in fact a war for freedom, and this discovery had almost reconciled it to the fact that a war for freedom involved the defence of Britain and the British Empire. From its pages she culled arguments and points of view which she exploited across luncheon and dinner tables for the benefit of Captain Arundel. He thought her an inspiring and well-informed girl as well as a charming one.

A daring project had occurred to her. It was based upon the fact that the Member for the industrial constituency of the Puddling Division of Staffordshire was reported to be desperately ill. He had been a great Trade Unionist stalwart in his day, but he was stalwart no longer, being seventy-seven years of age. Indeed, he had not for some time been able to give more than a very limited amount of attention to his Parliamentary duties and the insatiable and untiring Mr. Peppercorn had been keeping a fatherly eye upon his constituency, which was not far distant from his own.

For one brief moment Thais had toyed with the notion of taking direct action, but she had decided not to do so. Her instinct was always to remain in the background and act through another. She arranged a meeting between Evelyn and Hildebrand, at which, to the former's bewilderment, the conversation was almost entirely on the subject of politics, the role of the Labour Party, and the ambitions of Hildebrand, which under her tactful guidance had become very much more definite than they had been before he met her. Evelyn did not know what all this meant, but made himself amiable. Next day she learnt that the Member for the Puddling Division was dead. She went straight to Evelyn with the evening paper in her hand.

"This might be Captain Arundel's chance," she said.

"Arundel? I think he's a good fellow. But chance for what? Oh, I see, he wants to get into the House. But would he have a chance there? I thought they liked elderly Trade Union officials."

"They might like a change."

"Well, good luck to him. No accounting for taste—I mean his taste."

"I thought something might be done to help."

"How?"

"I thought you might go and talk to Soapy Sam."

"I—well, that's an idea, darling. But what should I say?"

"I told you never to call me 'darling' in the office. There isn't much you need say. Soapy Sam knows him. Just say that you know he's keen to become a Labour Member and could Soapy say a word in the constituency. Say you know it sounds like cheek on your part——"

"It would be cheek."

"But you thought a good man like that ought to be considered. Say you thought it might be good for the Ministry."

"What? Getting Arundel out of it?"

"No," said Thais hastily—this was too nearly what she herself thought. "I mean *kudos* for the Ministry to find such a good man for the House of Commons."

"Would he be good?"

"I think so," said Thais patiently. "Anyhow he'd look terrific. And he talks well, doesn't he?"

"Yes, I suppose he does. But could the Ministry do without him?"

"That's certainly a point. But I think we could just manage."

"All right. I'll think about it."

"You can have just two minutes to think. There's no more time. Now just ring up the private secretary, ask for an interview as soon as possible, and say your piece to Soapy."

"That Arundel wants to get into Parliament, and will he help?"

"Roughly that. Begin by saying you know how keen he is and you feel sure he is a good sort of man to get into Parliament. Then say you noticed the death of

Mr. Tomkins and you ventured to suggest that he should consider the possibility of Hildebrand Arundel standing in his place. Now go along like a——”

“Darling.”

“Oh very well, like a darling. Only go.”

Evelyn need not have been anxious. Mr. Peppercorn was overjoyed at the suggestion on several counts. He was delighted over the acquisition of new blood. He liked Arundel personally, as all who met him did. He was not insensible to the prestige of the Victoria Cross. He had heard it whispered that Mr. Ramsbotham of the Ministry of Sustenance had a nephew who also wanted to get into the House. Two of that family would be more than he could stand, fond though he was of old Tobias, as he explained to Evelyn. But chiefly he saw credit to be acquired for his own Ministry. Damme, he would see the young feller now. He would go up to the funeral in Puddling and—yes, damme, he would take the young feller with him. And if he could put the thing through he would turn Shick loose, give him the freest hand he had ever had and light such a candle as had never burned. There was a good majority, and of course there would be no Tory opposition because of the truce. If some freak dared to stand they would take the pants off him. Evelyn was dismissed with a hearty “Thank you, my lad!” ringing in his ears.

“It’s done!” he gasped to Thais, when he got back to his room. “He exploded almost before I’d time to pull the trigger.”

“Darling, you’re wonderful! You’re terrific!” cried Thais, and, against all office regulations, folded him in her arms.

The result need not be recorded here. It is fresh in the memory. For those who have forgotten, it is recorded

in the files of the newspapers—the lover of romantic detail may be specially recommended to study those of the *Evening Mercury*, Mr. Shick's old paper, to which he accorded his best bits. And what bits they were! Mr. Shick surpassed all previous records. In the circles which observe such contests it was considered that, at a bound, he had gone ahead of his chief rivals among the public relations officers, Macpherson of the Ministry of Sustenance, and Poppling of the Ministry of Commerce. There was even a story sneaking about ministerial corridors that Dr. Goebbels had been making inquiries in a neutral country as to the possibility of his transfer; but this was a piece of clumsy and misplaced jocularity.

Captain Arundel was duly elected. Myra Cunning, through the kindness of Mr. Peppercorn, the aid of the Establishment Officer, and a word put in in the right place by Miss Lydia Skittish, of the Ministry of Employment, was dereserved or unfrozen in order to become his private secretary. Who knows that she may not have had a hand in the reputation which he has since attained?

Thais trod on air. The foe was defeated and she herself remained in complete possession of the battlefield. But she showed no sign of her triumph, and none but the Establishment Officer, who was discreet and her slave, suspected it. She sighed once or twice as she recalled the way in which the dark hair of Hildebrand grew out from his forehead. However, in the arms of Evelyn she soon forgot not only Hildebrand's hair but all about him.

CHAPTER XI

EXPANDING ENTERPRISE

THUS with imagined wing our swift scene flies in motion of no less celerity than that of thought. Suppose that you have seen Evelyn and Thais marching hand in hand upon their destined road to win the war. O! do but think you stand in the corridor of the Ministry of Armaments and Supply a year after the events last recorded and through an open door survey the busy scene within one of the larger rooms. Half a dozen typists make it resound with the clatter of their machines. A seventh girl is turning the handle of a duplicator from which sheet after sheet of foolscap flies. Ever and anon a girl rises from her task to pass into the next room through a communicating door in order to consult Thais or hand her some completed work. Thais gives her answer or runs her eye down the document with her usual speed. Thais is never flurried, even when she has the best excuse for being so.

On this early autumn morning of 1942 Thais had every excuse for flurry. She was planning a move. The branch had finally outgrown the main building. It had been realized by all concerned, from Mr. Peppercorn downwards, that a further expansion was necessitated if it were to progress, and the invaluable work it had hitherto accomplished beckoned it on to further achievements. And even without taking into account the reinforcements which its personnel were about to receive, its labours were being hampered by lack of room. There was nothing

for it but to do the bold thing and move to some neighbouring premises.

This was, however, not so easy as had appeared at first sight. The Requisitioning Office had offered to turn out practically anybody except occupants of government offices, but unfortunately the immediate vicinity appeared to be largely tenanted by these. Accommodation had been suggested in four different buildings. She had inspected them all and now had in front of her the plans, with the occupants of the rooms and even the positions of the tables marked. They were none of them satisfactory. She gathered them together and took them to Evelyn's room.

In projecting you forward with such celerity over the interval of a year it would have been fairer to inform you that the first of the chief personages of this drama was much as she had been when last you encountered her. Thais was hardly changed, and if at all then for the better. The toils in which she was engaged had not added a furrow to her brow, but she bore if possible an even riper bloom. Your impression of Evelyn, however, might have been that he had put on weight, and you would not have been wrong. There seemed to be also upon his candid countenance a look of slight bewilderment, as though he were finding it hard to keep up with the progress of the great events which bore him forward on their swirling tide. That again would have been a true impression.

"I've come to the conclusion that all these would be makeshifts," said Thais. "We might just carry on with this in Caithness Street, but we should be cramped right from the start. We really must have a room for the Military Adviser, and we ought to have at least one spare to start with. It only means future trouble if we don't."

"Well, the only other is the place these Frenchmen are being turned out of. I believe they're being sent to Oxford. It's a block of flats, isn't it, in Rothbury Street. That's rather a long way off, but I think we ought to have a look at it."

"Yes, let's. After luncheon. Perhaps we could requisition a car for getting to and fro between it and here."

Rothbury Mansions, Rothbury Street, proved to be one of those early and ugly blocks of flats with the redeeming feature of having been built when large families were less uncommon than to-day. They possess not only seven or eight rooms but also more spacious rooms than are commonly provided in the most up-to-date buildings, so that the tenant is afforded opportunity to swing a cat, if such is his pleasure, and even to hang his clothes and store his suit-cases, though he may lack such smart amenities as a built-in refrigerator and a bath for every bedroom. Evelyn and Thais made their way up to the fourth floor in a creaking, shuddering, and obviously protesting lift.

They found the door of Number 27 open.

"Hullo," said Evelyn, "nobody in. Not back from luncheon yet."

"And the door open. Thoroughly foreign!" said Thais disapprovingly.

It was an ordinary sort of office. Two rooms evidently belonged to senior members of the department; the others held numerous tables, typewriters, and paper—lots of paper. They opened another door.

"My goodness!" said Thais. "Somebody lives on the premises. That's a sign of devotion to business—or is it?"

It was a double bedroom. Beside one bed lay a man's

slippers and beside the other a pretty pair of feminine mules lined with lamb's wool. Evelyn drew the attention of Thais to the fact that they were small, and Thais, noting that they were two sizes smaller than her own, snorted with virtuous indignation.

"We might put the Military Adviser in here when we've cleared out the domestic stuff," suggested Evelyn.

"Ye-es," said Thais, "we might. But, do you know, I believe there'll be room without. This is a fine big flat. And it might be useful to keep a bedroom. If there was heavy pressure of work and one got kept late—I mean if somebody got kept late—this would be very handy."

Evelyn thought over the matter for a moment or two and then said enthusiastically: "How right you are! That's a great idea, but it sounds as if one were going to be busier than ever here."

"One is," said Thais.

At this moment there burst in a plump young woman out of breath and red in the face. While she looked wildly round, both of them glanced at her feet. They were large.

"No one here?" she cried. "I regret it infinitely. Ah, Madeleine! Ah, *la petite rosse*! How do you say? The leetle beetch?"

"Well," said Thais mildly, "we might say something like that if we felt very bad about it. What's Madeleine done?"

"She should stay till I come back from luncheon. Now there is no one here to receive you. You will take over the flat? And no one to look after the documents, which are most secret."

"Well, we haven't looked at the documents," said

Thais. "And anyhow we're in the racket ourselves. I mean we're a branch of a Ministry. So there's no harm done."

At this juncture another girl arrived, evidently the errant Madeleine; for she began some excuses which were overwhelmed and lost in a flood of reproach delivered in French by the other. The new arrival's feet were distinctly smaller than those of the first-comer. For a moment Evelyn thought they might fit the mules, but in answered to his telegraphed question Thais shook her head decisively.

Madeleine was beginning to do the honours of the flat like an accomplished hostess, when another two people entered. One was a youngish man in the uniform of a French Lieutenant-Colonel, the other also in uniform, a slim and pretty young woman. There was no need to study her feet. Everything about her, from nose and ears to wrists and hands, was small and delicately moulded. She was the lady of the mules. The man introduced himself as Lieutenant-Colonel de Sotteville and her as his confidential secretary. Thais breathed towards the ear of Evelyn: "And how!"

The honours of the flat were done once again, though with but the slightest glance at the bedroom. As he closed the door, however, the Frenchman asked:

"And this lady, she is your confidential secretary?"

Evelyn replied that she was.

"We leave all the furniture exactly as it is, of course," said Lieutenant-Colonel de Sotteville. "You can change it or keep it as it is." His eye strayed in frank appreciation from Thais to the bedroom door.

"We shall make up our minds about that," said Thais coldly. "But we think this will do us. It's the best we've seen."

In that case, the Frenchman said, they could have it at once. He and his staff were moving out on the morrow and would leave everything tidy. Evelyn asked why they were leaving London.

"I think," said the Frenchman, "it is because they have just found us and now they want us not to be so near the Free French. It might be inconvenient—now that they have found us."

"Found you? I don't understand," said Evelyn. "Were you lost and aren't you Free French?"

"We were lost. We called ourselves the forgotten men. Now we are found again and it is not so good. Some interfering person in the War Office or the Foreign Office must have discovered us. We are not the Free French. We are the headquarters of the French who are on the side of the Allies but do not accept the leadership of the General de Gaulle. We are called the French in Chains, *les Français Enchaînés*—". He touched a shoulder-flash which bore the initials F.E. "We work for France and the Allies but by ourselves. Nobody sees us. Nobody comes near us. We have been here ever since the winter of nineteen-forty."

He looked round regretfully, and they felt distressed by the thought of tearing up such a deep-rooted organization.

"But what do you do? Have you got an army? And do you get paid?"

"What we do is to plan, to plan for the liberation. We plan from morning to night. We have planned for two years. Ah, we have wonderful plans. We have no army but a nucleus of officers and under-officers who will lead our army when it is no longer in chains. Our army is in France. As for pay, we get it from the British Paymaster-General. But there were months in which we

got no pay. That was hard. One time I put this fine Longines watch up the pipe."

"The spout," suggested Evelyn.

"Yes, up the spout. But pay is a small matter when you fight for the liberation. However, we get all the arrears in a lump one day. That was nice."

"It must have been. But it's a bit odd your being all on your own like this, isn't it?"

"Oh, there are odd things in war in England. I dare say there are other people like us, forgotten men."

"I wonder if we shall get lost here too," said Evelyn. "No such luck, I'm afraid."

Thais said nothing. Being lost was all very well, and might be pleasant, but there were advantages also in keeping in the public eye, or at least the official eye. If you did not then you could not expand, and how could you increase your value to the war effort without expansion? No, on the whole it would not do to get lost.

"You will find plenty of room for files," said the charming confidential secretary. "We have one thousand nine hundred and forty-seven files."

"Oh, we have more than that," said Thais. "Though that's quite a lot," she added generously.

"And we have also five or six hundred maps and diagrams," said the French girl viciously.

"Well, I am sure we shall manage," said Thais, but could not help adding: "Of course we shall have to put in a lot of telephones. We have so many people to keep in touch with. Well, now we must say good-bye, and I hope you will be able to do some nice planning at Oxford. If you find you're expanding you might perhaps take over one of the colleges."

"Good-bye," said Lieutenant-Colonel de Sotteville.

"Now we must do our packing. Are the boxes ready downstairs, Madeleine?"

They left the forgotten men and women and walked back together to the Ministry. They had a busy time before them. Like the previous tenants of 6 Rothbury Mansions, they had to pack. A direct telephone line had to be laid as a matter of urgent priority. A number of fittings had to be installed. Thais was deputed by the Establishment Officer to engage a messenger herself, and that afternoon when Evelyn went to her room she dismissed three candidates. He noticed that one of them was even older than the general run of government messengers, lame, and delicate-looking. He reflected how trying the work of a messenger must be for him and decided that he would be the last choice for the post at Rothbury Mansions.

Evelyn himself had an interview next morning with the Military Adviser, who called to announce that he was ready to take over his duties at any moment. He was a tall and cadaverous major, who said that he had had experience of liaison duties with the Americans when stationed in Iceland. That had, however, been rather a strain and had ended abruptly. Evelyn asked whether the work had been very hard, whether he had broken down, and if he were now quite fit again. He answered that the worst strain had been that of American hospitality. He had not exactly broken down, but was sorry to say that he had got rather tipsy one cold day.

"In public?" asked Evelyn. "Well," he added mildly, "you must try not to do that there 'ere."

"Oh," said Major Waterson, "I wasn't all that tight. It was a little trouble I got into. I think I had just enough drink to make me a bit rash. As a matter of fact I sold an army steam-roller to a local contractor.

It would have been good business for the army because he made better use of it than we did. And no one would ever have found it only unfortunately he was short of petrol and took to running it into our dump to fill it up every morning. And one fine day the chap who used to drive it spotted it and there was a hell of a row. They found there were extenuating circumstances and previous good record, but it would have been a bad look-out if the C.O. hadn't had a sense of humour and hushed it up. But he thought I'd better try something quite different. So here I am. And the first story every new arrival in Iceland hears is my story."

Evelyn and Thais agreed that he must be an enterprising sort of fellow. The important thing was to canalize his enterprise so that it might prove of service. They decided that on the whole there was little risk of his selling the Gestettner duplicating machine or some of the typewriters. They started to draw up a schedule of his functions, but came to an abrupt halt because they could not for the time being see what he was to do. Thais suggested that he might be flown over to the United States, where the military authorities were taking an increasing interest in monobelium, but Evelyn wondered whether the hospitality might not again be too much for him. It would never do for him to sell the aeroplane. To go on with, he would attend the military conferences at the Ministry of Propaganda, visit Ordnance depots, and keep in touch with the War Office. As to his nominal role of adviser, they could not make up their minds what he could possibly advise them about. They felt sure he would be useful and that time would prove the necessity of the appointment.

For two or three days the work under Evelyn's control virtually ceased. It was impossible to answer letters,

though urgent demands could be attended to on the telephone. Fortunately, it was a quiet moment, just before El Alamein, when all demands for the immediate future had been met. On the evidence available it does not appear that the move had any serious effect upon the conduct of the war.

The new premises looked very business-like when they were fully equipped and the augmented staff had got to work. The shortage of space, of telephones, and of typewriters, which had recently been a serious handicap, had been remedied. A car driven by a member of the W.V.S. had been placed at the disposal of the Monobelium Branch. A member of the Soviet Military Mission, Colonel Volkhov, who was one of their first visitors, was much impressed. Evelyn and Major Waterson paid a return call upon him to arrange for the despatch of a packet of monobelium to Russia, and returned in a dazed condition vowing that vodka was a really democratic drink and that for the first time in their lives they realized the strength of the Russian spirit. Major Waterson kept saying "Death—hic—to the Fascist invader!" all afternoon. Evelyn, however, found himself unable to eat any breakfast next morning, and Mrs. Allardyce said she had always foreseen where the overwork would lead to and that sleeping at the office was not to be encouraged. Thais did not discourage sleeping at the office but forbade more than one visit a month to the Soviet Mission.

Evelyn took Colonel Volkhov up to Rutland, where they stayed at Carstairs Hall for the week-end and Lady Eva invited two prominent Socialist intellectuals who had written books about Russia to meet him. Colonel Volkhov was bored with the intellectuals, but struck up a friendship with a retired British officer who had fought in Denikin's army. On Saturday night there was a

meeting at the works at which Colonel Volkhov made a rousing speech in Russian and the British officer translated it, less rousing, into English. Both were, however, very well received. The intellectuals also spoke, but aroused little interest. There was no vodka at Carstairs Hall, but plenty of whisky, as well as a large pot of caviare which Colonel Volkhov had obligingly brought with him. Lady Eva told Evelyn that there was certainly something in the Soviet Union. Everybody seemed happy except the two intellectuals, whose noses were undoubtedly put out of joint. One of them, to the general surprise, wrote an article critical of Russian policy in Persia not long afterwards.

On Evelyn's return to London he was astonished to find the elderly, lame, and delicate-looking messenger installed at the new premises at Rothbury Mansions. He tackled Thais on the subject. Could she not, he asked, have chosen someone rather more active? She replied that he had a most interesting family history. He was a bachelor, aged fifty-six, who lived with his father and mother, aged seventy-nine and seventy-eight respectively, and his grandmother, aged ninety-eight. The latter was a remarkable old lady with all her faculties, who took pleasure in reading novels, but never now left her bedroom.

"That's terribly interesting, darling," said Evelyn, "but I don't see how we help this wonderful family by taking him over because he's already in government employment and earns no more by coming to us."

"Well, there are various ways we might be able to help him," said Thais. "That occurred to me directly I heard his history and realized how poor they were and how little they needed clothes coupons. Four books in that family! Just fancy! By the way, darling, could you

lend me a couple of pounds this week, like an angel? Thank you so much."

She smoothed out a faint crease in a frock which Evelyn suddenly realized was new. He congratulated her upon it. An hour or two later he realized, as often before, that Thais thought of everything.

CHAPTER XII

FROM PRODUCER TO CONSUMER

Mr. Thistlethwaite (Scour, Lab.) asked the Minister of Armaments and Supply what were the precise functions of Mr. Evelyn Allardyce, whether he was a cousin of Mr. John Carstairs, the proprietor of the monobelium monopoly, what was his salary, why it was necessary to provide a separate department to deal with this one metal, and to what extent the production of monobelium had increased as a result of Mr. Allardyce's activities.

Mr. Peppercorn (Hickleton, Lab.) said that Mr. Allardyce had been appointed to control the production and distribution of monobelium, which was vital to many war industries. He was glad to say that it had now been possible to send a shipment of this invaluable alloy to Russia. (Cheers). He understood that Mr. Allardyce was related to Mr. Carstairs. He had been chosen as the one available man of outstanding ability with full knowledge of the subject. His salary was £1100 per annum with a small allowance for necessary expenses. A separate branch, with a small staff, had been found essential for the allocation of a precious product for which

there were many conflicting demands. He feared he could not say by how much production had increased, as the knowledge would be of service to the enemy, but he could assure his hon. friend that it was satisfactory.

Captain Chutney (East Horseley, Con.)—Does the right hon. gentleman not consider that it would be more seemly for an older man and one unconnected with the firm of Carstairs and Sons to hold this appointment?

Mr. Peppercorn.—The hon. and gallant member is an expert on the subject of seemliness. (Laughter.) I must confess that I do not consider it altogether seemly to snipe at a devoted and able temporary civil servant who cannot answer the innuendos directed against him. (Cheers and some cries of: Why not?) It is not in the tradition of the House. (Cheers.)

Mr. Thistlethwaite.—Why not nationalize the thing?

Mr. Peppercorn.—Ideologically that would be the best solution. I am myself in favour of the nationalization of basic industries. But I must freely confess I could not guarantee that in this case it would result in any notable reduction of administrative man-power. That's a serious confession, I know, for one of my political faith, but there it is. (Laughter.)

Mr. Thistlethwaite.—Is the right hon. gentleman still a member of the Labour Party?

Mr. Peppercorn.—My services to the Labour Party must, I fear, make a poor showing when set beside those of the hon. member. (Laughter.) But, such as they are, I propose to continue them.

Sir J. Bludyer (Hassocks, Lib). Can we have an assurance that the somewhat blatant publicity associated with Mr. Allardyce and his control of monobelium will not continue?

Mr. Peppercorn.—It's all a matter of names. The excessive

modesty in which we shroud ourselves (laughter), this thick veil of modesty, I say, is just occasionally lifted an inch to display something of our activities. But I should not call that blatant publicity myself. I should prefer to call it a slight relaxation of modesty. If we did not allow it sometimes we might burst (laughter), which I am sure the hon. member would deplore.

"Good for Soapy Sam!" said Thais, after Evelyn had read these parliamentary exchanges to her. "But I don't like to see all three parties sniping at us at once. We ought to do something about it."

"More publicity?" asked Evelyn.

"Perhaps, but it ought to be some special kind of publicity. Not the ordinary stuff which Sir John Bludyer calls blatant. It's got to be something in the spirit of the times."

"What's that?"

"This is the age of the Common Man," said Thais solemnly. "The gup about Rugby and trout-fishing and your clothes was good in its way, but we want a bit more of what you might call a left-wing slant now. Monobelium and the Common Man—how can we link them? And a bit of moral uplift too. If we could only get an archbishop to say something it might be a help, but I don't see how we can manage it. Monobelium makes the hardest steel in the world. The country needs its moral fibre hardened in the same way. There's a lot of moral slackness about. By the way, I came back early from luncheon yesterday and found Major Waterson petting one of the typists—fat girl called Faith Jones. I gave 'em hell. Pity, because he's settled down so nicely. Absolutely sober all the time and never sold a thing. Yes, a lot of moral hardening is wanted."

They had worked late at the office the night before. Thais was at this moment clad in a brassière and one slipper, and even the slipper was but balanced on one toe. This costume became her very well.

"Yes," she went on, "we must do something really *moral*. I'm absolutely certain there's a big volume of opinion in the country only looking for a moral lead, but I can't quite see my way to give it at the moment."

At the moment, it seemed to Evelyn, she was not in a position to do so. And yet she succeeded. She would not tell Evelyn how it was done and he never discovered. She rose only as high as a suffragan bishop, but he was an eloquent one. The denunciation of immorality is an attractive subject, as much so to the immoral as to the moral, and the bishop did not make the common mistake of weakening his case by bringing into it the condemnation of the pleasures and relaxations of the people, though he made some sharp references to those of the selfish section of the rich. His words went all round the country. And, having invited Evelyn to luncheon at the Minerva Club and been coached by him, he took monobelium, the priceless asset of Britain, as an illustration of the moral stiffening which the people of Britain required. Coming from such a source, there was no question of blatant publicity from the Ministry. Mr. Shick himself admitted that nothing he could have done himself would have been as effective.

The initiative of Thais seldom failed her, but this triumph had for the moment exhausted her vein of inventiveness. The next step in the great work came from an unexpected quarter. Evelyn's mother invited Mr. Plumpton and Lady O'Hara to dinner one night, and over the coffee the talk turned to the subject of visits to the troops.

"You know, Evelyn," said Lady O'Hara suddenly, "I think you ought to go, I do indeed."

"Me? I'm afraid I couldn't manage it?"

"Ah, why not? You ought to go and see how the things you put monobelium into, whatever they are, are working. Then you could give a nice little chat to some of the troops about how it's produced. Then when you came back you could give another nice little chat at the mine to the workmen. Couldn't you tell them how much their efforts are appreciated and how important it is for them to do a bit more? What do you think of the notion, Mr. Plumpton?"

"My dear lady, I—er—consider that fundamentally—yes, fundamentally is, I think, the word—that the project is sound and in a word—sound. The details would be a matter requiring—er—serious consideration. But I am sure, yes I am sure, that it would be a good thing for our friend, our young friend, to go out to the Mediterranean."

"Well now, you see, Evelyn, how Mr. Plumpton thinks of it. Now do, like a good lad, go to Mr. Peppercorn and say he must fix it up for you. Go on now, that's the boy!"

Mrs. Allardyce backed her up and said that if she herself were twenty years younger she would never rest till she got out to the Mediterranean. If she had formerly somewhat despised her son she had grown proud of him as he had advanced from strength to strength in the Ministry, and every addition to his staff had increased her pride because it was the surest indication of his importance.

Evelyn himself was disposed to think well of the project, but as he never formed an opinion on any matter until he had discussed it with Thais he waited to see

her next day before making up his mind. He found her enthusiastic. The thing would be, she said, to do as Lady O'Hara had suggested, to give an address to the troops on selected occasions and then come home and talk to the men and women at the mine. He was a little nervous about this part of the scheme, but she pointed out that it would be easy to prepare the talk to the troops before he left London and practically learn it by heart. He presently asked the approval of Mr. Peppercorn, who gave it heartily.

To the surprise and indignation of all, however, the War Office showed itself hide-bound and uninspired. It went so far as to say that it did not see what object was to be served by the proposed visit to North Africa. Thais remarked that this was only too typical of the British attitude; we never pushed decisively the goods the world public wanted and we failed even to let our right hand (the troops) know what our left hand (the workers) was doing. Mr. Plumpton added his weight to the application, then Mr. Peppercorn was drawn in, and all seemed on the point of settlement when Thais developed scruples. She was not sure that Major Waterson would be an adequate chaperon for Evelyn. She had heard that there were haunts in Algiers where the *danse du ventre* was to be witnessed—nothing very remarkable in itself, but perhaps unsettling to an impressionable mind. She decided that it would be better if she went too.

This threw the scheme once more into the melting-pot. It would be fatiguing to follow the long negotiations step by step. Let it suffice to say that she got her way in the end. It was agreed that, as there were now so many girls employed in the production of monobelium, it would be fitting for a representative of their own sex to give them heart-to-heart talks on the uses to which it was put in

the field. Obviously there was none with a claim to do so equal to that of Thais; in fact, she was the sole possible choice for the post. A neat solution was found as regards her status and the dress in which she was to make the trip. She was to be temporarily enrolled in the "Fannies". Evelyn was to travel in his Home Guard uniform. One small matter which proved unexpectedly and delightfully easy to arrange—the only one that could be said to—was that of clothes coupons. Extra ones were provided on a generous scale which enabled Thais to repair several deficiencies in her wardrobe. She came to the conclusion that several members of what Mr. Peppercorn called the commissar class had made visits abroad mainly for the sake of the coupons, but in these matters she had an excessively suspicious mind.

The expedition was a notable triumph for her, but it was not won in a day, or a week, or a month. The War Office needed a great deal of persuading and fought a lengthy rear-guard action. Only history can reveal the size of the file accumulated in its archives on the subject, but they did learn that it contained a succinct minute from the Permanent Under-Secretary which ran: "This girl is perfectly bloody." Their own file at Rothbury Mansions, entitled "Visit of Miss MacNutt to the Mediterranean", was one of the fattest in the office by the time it was closed. The year 1943 had for the most part skipped by with minute and counter-minute. The Germans in North Africa had surrendered; Sicily had been conquered; Italy had been invaded; the Volturno had been crossed before the way was clear. It must not be supposed that the Monobelium Branch had been engaged solely upon this question of a Mediterranean passage. Its activity, in fact, had never been so great. It had taken over another flat. A second-in-command

to Evelyn, a painstaking but rather pompous man named Plimsole, had been engaged. He had had time to work himself in. Thais, having herself chosen his private secretary and given her strict instructions as to what he was to be allowed to do and say and what not, considered that he might safely be left in charge.

It was a damp November morning when at last they found themselves in a reserved railway carriage on their way to Bristol. The party included a general, carrying secret mail in a bag weighted and punctured with numerous holes with brass eyelets, so that it should sink if it fell in the sea. There were a few more junior officers of all three services and some nondescript civilians, perhaps on their way to become interpreters in Naples or Bari. Thais, stunning in her tam o' shanter-like beret, was the only woman and contrived to appear unconscious of the fact. The men did not, least of all the general. Major Waterson, in the role of military expert of the branch, looked far more impressive in battle-dress than he had ever appeared in a tailed jacket.

At the airfield the Security Service did its duty. Most of the members were young men who had obviously been through a course and worked off enthusiastically, if mechanically, the lessons they had learnt. One of them, who interviewed the travellers singly, had a habit of lolling carelessly in his chair, looking as if he were utterly indifferent to the procedure, and then suddenly stiffening, firing a basilisk-glare upon his victim, and asking portentously: "Why do you want to go to North Africa?" With Evelyn this was ineffective because he answered without hesitation: "Because I was told to." Another, whom they nicknamed "the Gestapo", on three or four occasions abruptly entered the waiting-room where they were lounging about in boredom, walked

swiftly up to a member of the party, and asked some question such as: "Are you sure you showed all the papers in your pockets?" When this was put to Thais she replied that she had said so half an hour earlier and had not changed her mind since.

Presently the Gestapo came back yet again to announce that weather conditions were too unfavourable for the party to fly that day and that, since it was impossible to find accommodation for all of it in Bristol, it would be taken by bus to Wells. They would, of course, have to go through the Security Service again on the morrow—groans from the general and Thais—and meanwhile he hoped they would be discreet.

Wells was rather fun. All the males of the party volunteered to take Thais to see the cathedral and the episcopal palace, but she declared that the general had asked first. As often happens in such cases, the weather cleared completely, and a pale afternoon sun beamed upon the lovely little place as they went to see its sights. Everything went well. A member of the party proved to be an authority on ecclesiastical architecture and was able to explain to them why the cathedral was the most conventual in England, an explanation which appeared to give pleasure to all present, that is everyone except Thais and the general, who had unfortunately got lost. Then, when they strolled across to look at the palace in the now dying light the swans came sailing round the moat and one of them did its world-famous trick—said to attract more visitors than the cathedral itself, since there are many cathedrals but only one performing swan—of seizing in its beak the overhanging bell-rope and ringing the bell. Thereupon an aged domestic appeared and threw them their evening meal. Evelyn congratulated him that there had been no bombs anywhere near.

"That there were," he answered, clearly affronted. "In December vorty a big 'un fell in the corner of a meadow not a mile away."

They bade him good evening and went back to their pleasant inn. Thais and the general, having found themselves again, had preceded them and were now in the bar saying "chin-chin!" over their glasses of sherry. The barman was saying as they entered, "Not a mile away, it wasn't."

They fared well at table and afterwards. Evelyn, feeling somewhat tired, went to bed early, but his sleep was interrupted. There was a sound of revelry, at first confined to the piano but presently strengthened by human music. A hearty voice sang "Drink, puppy, drink!" which was received with great applause, and "The place where the old horse died," as an encore. Evelyn's impression was that the general was the vocalist. He was just dozing off again when a shout came up to him: "Miss MacNutt will now dance the hornpipe!" an announcement greeted by loud cheers. He almost made up his mind to dress and go down again, but reflected that he would be late for the hornpipe and that they would probably go to bed soon afterwards. In this last supposition he found himself entirely mistaken.

At breakfast Thais looked a little pink about the eyelids but was in the best of spirits. She confided to Evelyn that the general was a dear old thing and had invited them to stay in his mess if they came to Syracuse, where he had the best chef in Sicily and unlimited quantities of wine.

The coach then arrived and took them back to the airfield, where once more they entered the abhorred waiting-room. The Gestapo, apparently refreshed by a better night than most of his victims, renewed the attack,

but in his strength he was comparatively merciful and soon left the party to their ancient magazines and well-thumbed Penguins. Then came a sandwich luncheon, and then back to the literature.

"Why the heck they couldn't leave us in Wells I don't know," said the general. "The bar's open now and that Amontillado's the best in England."

At four o'clock they were called out for tea. And then at last they trooped to the aircraft, saying a fond farewell to the Gestapo. After ten minutes of roaring engines they taxied on to the runway, dashed along it, and in another few seconds they were in the air. Only those who had made the journey before knew where they were going and they were commendably discreet. For all Evelyn and Thais knew they might have been flying straight to Gibraltar, so that it came as some surprise to them when the aircraft, after three-quarters of an hour's flight, circled down and came to rest upon another airfield near the sea.

"This way, ladies and gentlemen, please," said a voice out of the dusk. "The baggage will remain in the aircraft."

"Where are we now, sir?" Evelyn asked the general.

"Newquay—the place that isn't mentioned."

There was no lack of precautions at Newquay. The back and front doors of the house into which they were conducted were guarded by American military policemen with pistols in their belts and batons in their hands. Inside those doors was a purified realm, into which only those who had been passed for security might enter and outside which they must not step to be contaminated by the world. They sat down in chairs similar to the last, all feeling tired and bored except one man who proclaimed with delight that he had found another copy of the book

which he had been reading at the last stop. The general, remarking that the speed of this air travel was wearing him out, went to sleep in his chair.

At seven-thirty they were served with a supper of cold tongue and salad, tinned peaches and custard. Afterwards four of them started a game of bridge with a pack of dirty cards. The hours slid slowly by in a haze of tobacco smoke. At eleven-thirty a voice summoned them forth once again. They climbed into the aircraft, feeling as if they had been travelling for weeks. They were shown how to put on their air-jackets and warned of the frightful consequences of displaying lights. They fixed the safety-belts round their waists. Then the pilot, an American, went to his seat. Once more the engines roared; once more they taxied on to the runway; once more they dashed along it; once more they were airborne.

But how much grimmer it seemed this time! The late hour, the darkness—for the pilot had flicked off the electric light—the knowledge that they had left friendly England and were speeding, unarmed and helpless, over the inky sea, all contributed to a sense of solemnity. Conversation was well nigh impossible, but the man behind Evelyn had an exceptionally loud voice and could be heard bellowing: "Condor it was, spotted them in the moonlight. Shot 'em down quick as quick. Jack was the only one that was saved."

Yes, they were very lonely, creeping past the shores of a Nazi-occupied Europe. The loud-voiced one was at it again. "Oh, they were done in by a bloody U-boat. Sent up a flair. Pilot thought there was a ship in distress. Dived down to see. U-boat shot him in pieces."

Most uncomfortable it all was. However, there was one thing relatively comfortable, the armchair. Soon he fell

asleep. Thais, whose imagination never worried her, had done so some time before.

CHAPTER XIII

SUNNY ITALY

AT Gibraltar Thais stood in the middle of the street, taking alternate bites from a banana in either hand. Having finished that pair, she started on another. When that was done with she ate two more. Then she announced that she thought she could do without any more for the next half-hour. That was about all they had time for in Gibraltar, where they came down only to fuel and overhaul the aircraft and to rest the pilot. The general had not even time for bananas, as he was engaged in serious and concentrated non-stop sherry drinking.

A sun such as England sees only in summer, and by no means continuously then, looked down upon them as they continued on their way. Far down below on the bright blue water the black shadow of the aircraft, astonishingly deep and distinct, moved parallel to them. Presently they espied a convoy, moving incredibly slowly, but with an appearance of placidity and unconcern. The sight brought to Evelyn a sentiment in violent contrast to that of the previous night. Here all was security and confidence. Down below them had been waged some of the most desperate and pathetic struggles of the war. Beneath those bright blue waters lay the wrecks of the ships that had sailed in the Malta convoys. And yet no one worried to-day. The command of the Mediterranean had been regained. There was very little further

danger. The general passed round a bottle of sherry, and Evelyn toasted those who had come this way before when things were not as now.

At last they bumped to a stop on Maison Blanche Airport. The general offered them a lift into the town, but they said they would not trouble him as a car was to come for them. It had been all arranged. He renewed his invitation to Syracuse, especially assuring Thais that if Evelyn found more occupation than she did in Italy she would not want for a temporary home. For the next two hours they regretted that they had not accepted his offer of a lift. Evelyn, who had never before had dealings with an airfield telephone, attacked it hopefully when they found the car had not arrived. It took him only about ten minutes to get on to the exchange, but thereafter his progress was less rapid. Three voices came to him in turn, one apparently from the port of Bone, a matter of 250 miles away; the second from a French anti-aircraft regiment, whose operator cursed him loudly; and the third from an officer who wanted a car and presently proved to be Major Waterson in the next box. Finally they got a lift into Algiers in a lorry. After wandering about for some time further they reached their destinations, the two men a mess in which they were to stay and Thais a requisitioned hotel. There she found the general, who said that, finding he could not get a plane to Sicily that night, he had got two tickets for an Ensa show.

They themselves also went on next day without seeing such sights as Algiers afforded. Their place was the front and they were to have no dealings with soldiers so distant from it. Thais therefore need not have worried about the *danse du ventre*. If it still existed in Algiers Evelyn was not invited to see it. He and Major Waterson spent a

very quiet evening, while Thais made what she described as "very quiet whoopee" with the general. This time he drove them out to Maison Blanche, Evelyn sitting beside the driver and Thais in the back of the car. She thought of confessing to Evelyn that the general held her hand under the rug, but decided that there would be little point in doing so as he never displayed jealousy. Major Waterson travelled in another car.

After a wait of an hour or two they set forth again, to land on the bleak Sicilian airfield of Catania, where they drank a mug of coffee and ate a spam sandwich in a hut. There the general bade them farewell, writing down the address of Thais so that, he said, he could take her out to dinner when he came to London on leave. He appeared most anxious to have Evelyn's also, but forgot to write it down.

Hitherto the weather had been fine, but as they flew over Calabria dense black clouds appeared, and as they came down on to the big Foggia airfield it was raining and colder than it had been in Wells. This time, though the telephone was no kinder than that at Maison Blanche, a car did presently turn up. A young officer who came in it announced that Evelyn and Major Waterson were to dine in the Commander-in-Chief's mess and sleep in a house reserved for his visitors, while Thais was to be put up by some A.T.S.—the first to reach Italy—who were quartered in a near-by convent.

"Ye gods!" said Thais. "And while they're knocking back the sherry and the Lachrymae Christi, I shall probably be drinking cocoa!"

"I say, you know," said the young officer, "I never thought of that. At least I thought, somehow, you might have been a bit different from what you are, if you know what I mean."

"I'm not sure I do," said Thais, "but from what you say it looks as if you'd arranged this—this infamy."

She had paused to think of the fitting word and at once realized that she had chosen well.

"I say, you know," said the young officer, "that's a bit hard. Now what can we do about it? The essence of good staff work," he went on, as if speaking to himself, "is to do the right thing in emergency. Now what does the bright young officer do?"

"I can't think," said Thais severely, "but something, I hope."

"Oh yes, he does something, he does something all right, trust him, but what?"

He picked up the telephone, listened a moment, shouted "Hullo" half a dozen times, then put it down.

"I've got it!" he exclaimed. You must dine in our mess. It's not very grand and nobody's above a major, but we've got wine and fruit and rather a decent gramophone. But we mustn't offend the A.T.S., so I'll get their top girl, who's very nice really though so broad in the beam. I'll get her to come too. That sounds all right. O.K. by you?"

"That's O.K. by me."

"Righty-ho. Well, these gentlemen have more time to spare than you have, so if they don't mind waiting half an hour I'll run you back to the A.T.S. convent—I mean the convent where the A.T.S. are billeted—to wash, always supposing there's any water to wash in. Then I'll persuade our Lizzie—that's what we call her when we're all boys and girls together—to come and dine with us. She loves it really, though she's so shy till you know her better. Then I'll come back for them and take them to their villa."

So Evelyn and Major Waterson sat and watched the rain falling on the airfield while the arrangements about Thais were set in train. Then they were hurried off to a pretentious but not unpleasant seaside villa where they were to pass the night.

Their further adventures that evening must, however, wait until passing mention has been made of hers. The night that "Monobelium Thais" dined in H Mess was to be a fruitful topic of conversation as long as the campaign endured. All sorts of people who were not eye-witnesses would talk about it, but how quickly would they fall silent and hold their manhoods cheap whilst any spoke who had actually been present! Yes, those few, that happy few, that band of brothers, they could always find a hearing. They had but to murmur "Well, as a matter of fact I was in on that night," and they were accorded more attention than if they had been in on the passage of the Volturno, the Garigliano, or the Sangro. The eye-witnesses were rather more numerous than might have been supposed, because towards midnight a surprising number of people drifted in, having heard, in the mysterious way in which such news spreads, that it was a good evening. A good evening it certainly was.

That of Evelyn and Major Waterson was much more decorous. They were courteously received by General Lysander, though he seemed a little puzzled about the object of their visit. Evelyn explained as best he could, which was not very well, and the Commander-in-Chief expressed himself as satisfied.

"Let's see now," he said in his charming soft voice, with just a hint of Irish in it. "Didn't I hear there was a lady coming out too? What's happened to her?"

"Oh, sir," said someone, "she's staying with the A.T.S. at their nunnery. But we're sending her up to the front to-morrow to see something of the troops."

"Well," said the Commander-in-Chief, "I hope she'll be comfortable, but I'm afraid she'll have a very quiet time."

As he drank his coffee Evelyn thought it only polite to compliment the officer sitting on his right on the excellence of the mess. The latter replied that they had an Italian woman cook of some fame, also a major-domo who looked after the purchase of turkeys, fish, fruit, and wine.

"They carry on business at the top of their voices," he said, "and they occasionally have a dreadful row. A couple of days ago he told her that she was an ignorant and ill-bred woman. She drew herself up—she's not bad-looking—and answered with terrific dignity: 'Ignorant and ill-bred? I'd have you know that for fifteen years I was the mistress of a magistrate.' He was crushed."

All had gone swimmingly up to this point, but the story nearly brought on a disaster. Major Waterson had enjoyed some excellent *vino*. He was completely sober, but just sufficiently mellowed to be in discursive mood. Evelyn saw his face light up at the story of the cook. He leant forward as if awaiting a break in the conversation.

To his horror, Evelyn realized that he was contemplating telling the tale about selling the steam-roller in Iceland. General Lysander was a man of the world, but he was also a Guardsman with a very strong sense of discipline and duty. He would not be amused—far from it. At all costs Waterson must be headed off. Evelyn, no great conversationalist, feverishly set himself to talk. He worried old topics of conversation as a terrier does

a rat. He started new ones. He feared General Lysander would think he had drunk a glass too many, but anything was preferable to allowing the tale of the steam-roller to be unfolded.

He kept it up well, but at last there came the inevitable pause. He could think of nothing more to say. After a terrible moment, during which Evelyn's tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of his mouth, Waterson began:

"When I was in Iceland in——"

Recovering his presence of mind, Evelyn stretched out his leg and kicked him on the shin. Unfortunately, in his excitement he kicked harder than he realized. Waterson gave a little yelp of pain. General Lysander asked what the matter was.

"Sorry, sir, I got a cramp in my leg."

"But what about Iceland?"

"Oh, Iceland, sir. Oh yes, sir, that's where I first got cramp. Lots of people do. They say it's the intense cold."

"I never heard that," said General Lysander.

Soon afterwards he got up and excused himself, saying that he had papers to deal with but that he hoped his guests would not hurry away. Waterson got his steam-roller off his chest, and it was very well received.

As they made their way back to the villa the rain had stopped and it was freezing hard. In the night it became so cold that Evelyn had to get up and put his coat on his bed. Yet when he awoke a squall was blowing from the south-west, bringing with it a torrent of rain. Evelyn decided it was an odd climate.

The rain stopped temporarily as they drove to the airfield after breakfast, but it blew harder than ever. Evelyn began to wonder whether it would be possible to fly. At the airfield he heard that it was. There was

no sign of Thais, and he and Waterson were sitting in the 'plane when she shot up in a car. She had been driven into Bari and had bought what was believed to be the last pair of silk stockings left in the town. Her cicerone—the same as on the previous night—assured her that she would be able to get all she wanted in Naples, but she said it was better to be safe than sorry.

"That's something at any rate, and no one can take it away."

Listening to the howling of the wind, which shook the aircraft, Evelyn permitted himself to wonder whether she would long be in a position to take an interest in mundane things such as silk stockings. He spoke of the weather to the pilot, a young Belgian, as the latter passed him on his way to the cockpit and was told it would be all right. A few minutes later they were in the air once more.

The flight was a short one. It seemed to be only a matter of a few minutes before they were turning for the descent. The turn was a long one, and Evelyn suddenly realized that two airmen among the passengers were taking a lively interest in the proceedings. Looking out of the window, he perceived that they had been blown away from the landing-strip and over the Adriatic. Back came the aircraft, wobbling considerably, and once again was carried out of its course. Everyone was interested now. But the third time was lucky. They landed all right, though rather far up the airstrip, and came to a halt about twenty feet from the end. A Spitfire was standing on its head in the sand-dunes beyond, just to illustrate what might have happened. The pilot came out of the cockpit laughing.

"You see," he said, as he passed Evelyn, "it was all right, as I say. We are on the strip in one piece. But,

let me confess to you, I thought at a moment we might be in the drink in three."

"I saw you were having some trouble in getting down."

"Getting down? Ah, no. That is not what you call a major trouble with a kite. It will always get down eventually, you see. The trouble is how, when, and where."

So far, so good, but during the next three-quarters of an hour they experienced to their cost what the Italian winter could do. The rain came down in sheets. The water penetrated between their necks and collars, turned their mufflers into soppy rags, and trickled down their bodies. The Adriatic was a boiling mass of dirty grey water topped with waves, foam, and flying spume. The improvised road along the beach was deep in water and mud, so that no car could reach them in their position at the far end of the airstrip unless it ran along the airstrip itself, and this was forbidden on account of the risk of another aircraft landing. (They heard afterwards that in fact theirs was the last to land on that airstrip for two days.) They eventually got into a hut nearby, but not until they and their luggage were thoroughly soaked. Then at last permission was given for the car which was awaiting them at the other end to drive up the airstrip, and they thankfully disposed of their soaked persons and chattels inside it. Half an hour later they were drying before a fire in a seaside cottage and filling the room with clouds of steam.

That evening they said their several pieces to a group of soldiers in a school-house, men who had come out to rest in the midst of the battle raging at the approaches to Ortona. They were well received, especially Thais. They spoke of the mysteries and wonders of monobelium,

the work at the mine, the distribution to the factories, the welding and testing of armour-plate, the production of the finished article. Thais talked also of the welfare of women workers, canteens, nursery schools. What impressed the troops most, however, was the administrative machinery which had been created in the past two and a half years out of nothing. They could not hear enough of the teleprinters, typewriters, telephones, reports, returns, applications in quintuplicate, of the vast network of information which enabled it to be seen at a glance how every hundredweight of monobelium was allocated by a carefully drawn up principle of priority and how it was being used. This was organization for total war indeed. It converted sceptics who had thought that all was done by muddling through and cynics who had questioned the utility of a swollen bureaucracy. Thais felt that, if she had desired a reward for the toils of the past, she had it here. Evelyn felt a vague glow of comfort.

The talks were repeated twice a day, wherever a building could be found big enough to contain an audience of anything over fifty and sound enough to keep out the incessant showers. The fame of the mission spread and brought down a posse of war correspondents, who were delighted with Thais and sent back messages in which she figured prominently. Numerous paragraphs appeared in the British press, to be telegraphed back to the Army newspapers. Only *The Jupiter* did not seem to be impressed. Its correspondent ruefully showed Evelyn a message which ran:

"Yours of yesterday re monobelium unwanted unused stop can cover monobelium stories at home stop battle first consideration stop if want change try Italian political situation ends."

"Very retrograde attitude," said Thais. "As if anyone could understand Italian politics!"

They dined in the war correspondents' mess, where the wine was more plentiful than they had ever found it and was followed by Italian brandy capable of taking the bristles off a hedgehog. Major Waterson told his story about the steam-roller, but this time it excited relatively little interest and was put into the shade by tales of loot, which appeared to interest the journalists particularly.

"Just after we landed," said one of them, "Larry Stiggins and Billy Hopkins went out at night to loot Italian cars. They got a nice pair of Fiats. Larry's had only three tyres, but had a Leica camera in it. Billy's had all four tyres, but it wouldn't go. So Larry swopped the camera for three of Billy's tyres. So there they were, Larry with a good car and six tyres and Billy with only a camera. Then a Wop came to Larry with a Leica camera and he bought it for one of the tyres. So there Larry was, where he started, except that he'd got two extra tyres. But unfortunately Billy recognized the camera and found it was the one he'd traded for the tyres and that the Wop must have pinched it. Naturally Larry wouldn't give it up, so poor Billy was left with nothing at all. Pretty tough, don't you think?"

'It was indeed,' said Evelyn. He was about to add that Larry did not appear to have behaved with marked generosity when he observed that famous writer, to whom he had already been introduced, was near at hand. He therefore contented himself with asking how the car was running.

"Oh, that old Fiat!" said Larry. "Let's see now, I swopped her for four gold watches, an electric razor, and a pair of field glasses. I sold two of the watches for a

tenner each and the razor for a fiver. By this time poor old Jimmy Podgers who'd bought the car from me had gone broke and bust his watch, so I bought back the Fiat for ten pounds and a gold watch. Then I swopped the field glasses for a silver coffee pot, and I gave the Fiat and the coffee pot for a German Mercedes-Benz—a nice car too."

Evelyn tried dizzily to calculate how much Larry was in hand on these transactions. He had to give it up, but decided that he was at all events a good business man. He inquired after the Mercedes-Benz.

"I've still got her," said Larry, "but if you want to trade I might consider it. Let's see now, I'm in the market for jewellery and cash at the moment."

Evelyn assured him hastily that the shortness of their stay in Italy put trade on these lines out of the question. In any case he had only just arrived and had acquired neither jewellery nor cash. The plea was cheerfully accepted. No one was expected to trade with his own cash, only with what he had acquired, starting with loot.

"I heard of a better deal than that over the other side," said another. ("The other side" always meant the western side of the Apennines, where the Fifth Army was operating.) "Tom Pipkin got hold of a guy in Naples who said he was Musso's personal valet and had got some good stories about the girls he used to sleep with. I mean the girls Musso used to sleep with, not the valet. Apparently the valet sometimes slept with Musso's girls because Musso's not so good at sleeping with girls as he used to be, but even if the valet was better than he was the news feature was Musso sleeping with the girls. Now Tom's a photographer, you see, and he couldn't make up his mind how he was going to make the most of this

guy. He took a photograph or two of him, but there was nothing much in that.

"Then he had a brain wave. He put this guy in his jeep and drove him up to a cottage on the side of Vesuvius. He left him in charge of the driver with orders to poke a revolver in his ribs if he got fresh or tried to escape, and to shoot over the head of any warco. who came after him. Then he drove the jeep back himself. The first person he met was Bert Mendoza, who hadn't had a decent story for days. He told him about this, and naturally Bert was keen to get on to it. 'Well!' says Tom, 'you can have it as an exclusive, but what's it worth?' Well, there was a lot of cross talk and Bert said Tom was a blood-sucker, but the end was that Bert wired home and his paper, the *Daily Stench*, paid Tom a hundred quid for the story."

"Certainly a good bit of business," said Evelyn.

"Well, it sounded that way, but it wasn't quite as good as it sounded. You see, Tom met an American war correspondent next day, and was telling him the tale with great pride, when the Yank says to him: 'Why you darned silly bastard, any New York paper'd have paid you a thousand bucks at the worst. How true it is that there's a sucker born every day!' So Tom hasn't been quite so pleased with himself since."

In the mornings the party saw the battle from as near as their guides would allow them to go. They saw—and heard—a barrage. They saw a Bailey bridge erected, a fight between Spitfires and Messerschmitts, and bigger traffic blocks than those of pre-war London. They ate abundant army rations, supplemented by oranges and apples and washed down by *vino*. It rained, snowed, and froze, but occasionally a dazzling sun justified the oranges.

Then they flew over to the other side, where some

opposition was expected in front of a place called Cassino. They walked the dirty, picturesque streets of Naples and were sprinkled with sulphur because the dirty picturesque inhabitants had developed typhus. Thais bought two more pairs of silk stockings and some beautiful gloves of leather and string. They saw Vesuvius in eruption.

They had come to talk to British troops in the American Fifth Army, but the Americans heard of them—or at least of Thais—and asked for talks also. This time some American journalists attended and sent messages flying across the Atlantic. Thais began to toy with the possibility of a visit to Washington in the New Year.

They were pleased to learn that an official message had been sent home announcing the success of their visit and suggesting others of similar character. ("But it'll be a frost if they send out a girl who's a disappointment after your girl," said Evelyn's informant. "And it won't be easy to maintain that standard.")

They were much in demand, but Thais decided after a fortnight that they must get back. She feared things might go wrong at Rothbury Mansions. The new second-in-command had little experience, and his private secretary, though well coached and a seemingly reliable girl, might find some of the problems beyond her. They gave a last talk to a huge audience in a theatre in Naples, and next day set out for North Africa on their way home. They said farewell to an Italy lashed by rain and two days later were sunbathing on the veranda of the Rock Hotel at Gibraltar. Anxious as Thais was to get back to work, she was pleased enough that there was no passage available that night and that they had another day to spend in the sun while it lasted and amid the sherry glasses after it had gone down.

At midnight, festooned with bananas and metaphori-

cally full to the back teeth with Amontillado and Rioja, they took their seats in the aircraft and sped once more into the black Atlantic.

CHAPTER XIV

BACK ON THE HOME FRONT

NOT for a long time had there been so much liveliness at Carstairs Hall. Lady Eva had bribed or persuaded three or four extra women to come in and help with the bedrooms and the washing-up. The big drawing-room, in dust sheets for the past three years, had been reopened. The stately house, built by Hawksmoor after the Carstairs of that day had married the city heiress, was furnished up, cleansed as far as possible of the relics of a number of evacuees who had recently returned to their homes, and made ready for the biggest week-end party that had assembled in it since the first year of the war. Mr. Peppercorn, who had graciously agreed to bring only one private secretary, a notable economy for him, was there. Three big industrialists, the heaviest customers of monobelium in the whole of the United Kingdom, had come. A sporting peer, who went everywhere and did everything, nobody quite knew why or how, was in the gathering. There were also, besides the Minister, three M.P.'s—one Conservative, one Liberal, and one Labour—Mr. (now Sir Jeremy) Plumpton, Mrs. Allardyce, the mine manager, the Russian Colonel Volkhov, and a British brigadier. Finally there were the heroes of the occasion, Evelyn and Thais. Counting their host and hostess, they

sat down eighteen to dinner. The Carstairs Burgundy and port, well known to connoisseurs, flowed as freely as if there had not been a war or any interruption in the wine trade.

This was, in fact, a very special occasion, on which the story of the Mediterranean tour was to be related in full to the workpeople. Evelyn and Thais were not, of course, to be the only speakers. Mr. Peppercorn was to take the chair and could be relied upon for one of his rousing orations. Each of the M.P.s was to say his say, and both John Carstairs and Lady Eva were to add a few words. But all these half dozen speeches were, it was hoped but not guaranteed, to take only about half an hour between them, whereas the two travellers were allotted half an hour each. Thais had written both their talks and was confident that the matter was quite as good as Mr. Shick had provided for the Minister, and though she could not hope that the manner would in either case compete with his, yet a pair of her Italian silk stockings made her feel fully up to the occasion. She was growing used to the privilege of being the only young woman present, but nevertheless found the marked attentions paid to her by the sporting peer pleasant enough. If only Evelyn could have been induced to display a little jealousy!

It was a good dinner, with plenty of good talk. After the port had been solemnly and learnedly appreciated and John Carstairs had been induced to relate its history, the coffee arrived and the brandy bottle was carried round but refused by everyone except Colonel Volkhov. Lady Eva glanced at her watch. Colonel Volkhov then demanded of her how much time they had before they must start for the meeting, and she had to admit that there was another twenty minutes to spare. She tried to signal to Mrs. Allardyce and Thais that they should

withdraw for the ceremony of nose-powdering, but the Russian waved her aside.

"We have time," he said, "for a toast." His eye fell upon the butler, who at once started to walk round the table filling the brandy glasses. "We will now drink," said Colonel Volkhov, "to Great Britain and the Second Front. And we will observe the good old Russian custom which is called 'Once only!' and the good old English custom which is called 'No 'eel-taps!'"

They drank, and most of them spluttered. John Carstairs gave a slight groan at the thought of how his old brandy was being treated for the first time in its long life.

Colonel Volkhov then rose again, and the butler, who had been trained in a good school, signalled to the footman for another bottle of brandy.

"We will now drink to the Soviet Union and death to the Fascist invader," said Colonel Volkhov. With a practised eye he observed that the second bottle was not yet forthcoming and went on: "It is not right to mingle two toasts and I should not insult this most distinguished company by doing this in the ordinary circumstances. But these circumstances are not ordinary because we 'ave so little time at disposal. Therefore we will mingle this toast to the Soviet Union with toast to the victory which must come. Once again, ladies and gentlemen, it will be 'Once only!' and 'No 'eel-taps!'"

Lady Eva had prevented the butler from pouring more than a thimble-full into her glass on this occasion, and like the good sportswoman that she was drank it off. This time she pushed back her chair and succeeded in catching the eyes of Mrs. Allardyce and Thais, but Colonel Volkhov was again too quick for her.

"We will 'ave one more toast," he cried, and again the butler got busy. "It is to our gracious hostess who

gives the party. I make you the toast, ladies and gentlemen, of Lady Eva Carstairs!"

This time, when the dreadful business was over, Lady Eva fled from the room. As Thais tottered out on the uncertain heels of Mrs. Allardyce she noticed with alarm that, while most of the countenances round the table were somewhat flushed, that of Evelyn was particularly so. It was, in fact, a deep crimson over the cheek-bones, and his eyes were glassy. As she escaped through the door she heard the Russian call out: "We 'ave just time for one more little toast. It is——" but she failed to hear what it was and when she asked Evelyn afterwards he did not remember.

A few minutes later they got into the motor-coach which was to carry them into action and sped down the dark avenue between the bare chestnuts. Arriving at the big hangar, where the audience had already taken their seats, they were conducted to the flag-draped platform, on to which they marched, all except Mr. Peppercorn slightly embarrassed and most slightly pickled, to take their seats in a melancholy row. The audience cheered. They were duly impressed by the Minister and they liked John Carstairs, though the majority of them professed to regard him as one of the worst examples of the capitalistic and monopolistic systems.

While Mr. Peppercorn was speaking Thais glanced towards Evelyn, who had not been seated near her in the coach. He appeared to be about to fall asleep. "Blast that Red Army man!" she said, as she thought under her breath, but Lady Eva beside her heard and murmured: "I couldn't agree with you more fully, my dear."

Mr. Peppercorn was really excellent; in fact he spoke in Mr. Shick's best vein and did not take more than

ten minutes to say quite a lot. The three back-benchers then spoke in turn, exceeding their ration of time but not too seriously. The meeting was, however, tepid. Most of those present had completed a long and hard day's work and were not really in the mood for so many speeches, however short. The four reporters present, one from an agency and three from local papers, had put down their pencils after the Minister had done and were sitting back in an attitude of boredom. The M.P.s were all, it must be confessed, a bit dull. When Thais was introduced by Mr. Peppercorn as "a pillar of our office and the only English girl who has toured the battlefields of Italy" she felt not only the natural anxiety which always accompanies a first public speech but also the special responsibility of one who goes to the wicket to stop a rot against masterful bowling. She also found herself in doubt as to how the next batsman, on whom so much depended, was going to shape.

These three adverse factors did not ruin her speech, but they undoubtedly did it harm. She got a cheer for her looks as she rose and on several occasions was accorded an appreciative murmur of applause for some of her really good points. There was a round of clapping at the end. It was by no means a disaster, but it was not enough. The periods had not tripped off her tongue as they should have. The meeting was but half won and might still be lost. And if ever there was a man to lose a meeting, she feared it was Evelyn to-night.

The Chairman was up again. In this country in time of war, he said, most men and women were doing their duty and doing it well. No one who did his or her duty could be spared from the national effort. But in every piece of machinery there were certain key parts which were vital to the working of the whole. He had

no hesitation in telling them that his friend Mr. Allardyce was that rare thing, the irreplaceable man. He not only ran a highly important office with a staff of over thirty; he had built it up from the bottom and organized it himself. That was a fine achievement. (The speaker waited a moment for applause; Thais said "Hear! Hear!" loudly, and the audience gave quite a respectable cheer.) Mr. Peppercorn went on to say that Evelyn was, as they doubtless all knew, the cousin of Mr. John Carstairs, the respected chairman of the company. That entitled him still further to their regard. He would not, he said, detain them further, but would call upon Mr. Allardyce, who he was sure had a most interesting story to tell them.

Evelyn rose to his feet, and Thais held her breath. To her horror, he stood staring at the audience, getting even redder in the face but saying nothing. He looked as though he were going to burst. At last he opened his mouth and made a dreadful grimace, but no words came. The silence grew more and more anxious.

Suddenly a voice from the back called out: "Loose his collar and shoe-laces!" and there was an answering shout of laughter. It spurred Evelyn into action. He took a step forward and began:

"Mishter Peppercorn, ladish and gentlemen. You want to hear about what I—hic—what I saw in Italy. Italy in wintersh got some points in its favour. Apples and oranges and vino—absolutely lashings of vino, which I like very much but troopsh prefer beer and mish it a lot. But its got a lot of points against it. Weather foul"—his voice was clearing now—"fouler than England at its worst. Frost and snow and rain and mud. Mudsh perfectly foul. Then it's inhabited by very depressed looking Wops, very depressed they look. I don't wonder

either, living in Italy in winter and fighting going on all over the place. I expect we should look depressed too if we had foreigners fighting a private war all over the place and we weren't interested the least little bit in it."

Thais decided that, though the speech bore no relation to that which she had prepared, it might have been worse.

"Of course," Evelyn went on, "there are some Italian soldiers in it too on our side, but they look the most depressed of all. The curse of the country is rivers. Perfectly dreadful country for rivers. You go up the Adriatic coast and every few miles you come to a river. Now you see those rivers marked by thin blue lines on the map, but they're not really a bit like that. They run in horrible great gorges with sides as steep as cliffs. Half the time you can't get a tank down the side and if you do ten to one it gets bogged in the mud at the bottom. Then you've got Jerry clinging on on the other side like grim death, shooting at you with everything he's got, and believe me he's got a lot. That's the sort of battle our boys have to fight out there, and there's one after another. It takes a lot of vino and oranges to make up for that sort of thing.

"I talked to lots of our chaps out there about you and the work you're doing for them, and they liked hearing about it all. I told them all about the stuff monobelium goes into and how it's parcelled out to make it go as far as possible."

He paused a moment for inspiration and also because he was again troubled by a slight but undeniable hiccup. It caused a titter. But that seemed to put him on his mettle. Suddenly he began to speak quickly, and at the same time the pencils of the reporters began to work. He painted for that audience, so used to conventional phrases which meant so little, pen pictures of the theatre

of war. He spoke of the incredible sight of oranges gleaming golden on trees laden with snow. He told of flying over the Apennines in dense cloud and wondering the while whether the aircraft would hit a mountain peak. He showed them the pack mules plodding along in single file on their sure and dainty little hooves with supplies for the garrisons of isolated posts on the upper slopes. He described the endless columns of motor transport on the main roads, driving almost bonnet to tail in contempt of the *Luftwaffe*, virtually hunted out of the skies. He spoke of pathetic smashed villages, with the inhabitants scraping about in the ruins trying to find some remnant of their miserable possessions. Bivouacs in the olive groves; camps by the swirling grey Adriatic; Vesuvius glowing in the dark over the Bay of Naples; the colossal empty palace of Caserta, with bad portraits of sinister-looking Bourbon kings stacked in deserted rooms like oleographs in a junk-shop; General Lysander suave and courteous at the head of his mess-table; and above all the British soldier talking of league football and his favourite "local"—all these scenes and persons passed before his audience in an endless series.

He gave them the latest jokes from the front, even including the slightly daring one about the cook who had been for fifteen years the mistress of a magistrate. He outlined the furious Battle of the Sangro. He described the untidy but picturesque streets of Naples and the lovely curve of the coast to the northward. In short, he taught those people more about the campaign in Italy than most of them had absorbed since it had begun. They listened with rapt attention, then, as he finished abruptly with another slight hiccup, gave him round after round of applause. Under its cover Lady Eva leant towards Thais and said in a low voice. :

"A great performance! I didn't know dear Evelyn had it in him. This must be your doing."

"I can honestly assure you it isn't, Lady Eva," said Thais. "It's the brandy and nothing else. I was thinking of begging a bottle from you to keep in store for a great occasion."

They smiled at each other. Lady Eva was thinking: "I should be most astonished to learn that she's not his mistress, but she's a nice gel." (She pronounced it "gel" even in her thoughts.) Thais was thinking: "I bet she knows, but it doesn't matter. And Evelyn was terrific." And each knew what the other was thinking.

John Carstairs was speaking now, and speaking well, but it did not matter what he said. Everyone was enthusiastic, and he had only to praise Evelyn in order to win a cheer. When he had finished Lady Eva rose and in her cool, clear voice said just the right concluding words. Then the meeting broke up after just over two hours. Platform party and audience made their way by the light of electric torches to a neighbouring hangar where there was a buffet at one end and the rest of the floor was cleared for dancing. Soon Evelyn was piloting a dashing blonde with a quiff which stood up eight inches and wobbled amazingly as she moved. From her Evelyn learnt that the price of clothes coupons had gone down owing to a glut and that you could buy them with your cigarettes at the canteen. Thais was in the arms of a tall and melancholy foreman who danced well but had naught to say. The party continued till midnight, and as they made their way back everyone agreed that it had been a success, yet that it might not have been but for the performance staged by Evelyn.

Several members of the house-party at Carstairs Hall rose with slight "hang-overs" on Sunday morning, but

they soon walked them off. It turned out one of those rare but exquisite days of English mid-winter with a pale sun gleaming on frozen puddles and setting the little icicles on the branches dripping and a clean biting air that was like a tonic. Mr. Peppercorn, looking every inch a squire in Harris tweed jacket and cap and shepherd's plaid knickerbockers, invited Evelyn and Thais to join him in a constitutional, and the others, scenting public business of high importance, left them to themselves, though the sporting peer, who had looked forward to a private walk with Thais, was a little petulant at missing it. They set off down the back avenue, talking of this and that for the first five minutes.

"Now then, young feller," said the Minister presently, "we'll have a little bit of shop if you don't mind. Now, what would you say was the most important aspect of the monobelium problem to-day?"

"To increase production," said Evelyn.

Mr. Peppercorn's jaw dropped.

"Yes, yes, of course," he said, "that's very important, very important indeed. By the way, how is production going?"

"Well, sir, we don't seem to be able to get it up more than five per cent on the 1941 figures. The new drill on order when I came to the Ministry then still hasn't arrived."

"Bless my soul!" said Mr. Peppercorn. "Damme, why didn't you tell me that before, man?"

"We've reported it monthly."

"Report—report—report!" said Mr. Peppercorn testily. "You ought to know me and my ways better by now. How the hell can I read all the reports? When there's a big thing to be done I expect the man who wants it done to come to me. Then it is done. Now to-morrow

when you get back telephone Slow and Canny at Glasgow—they're the people, aren't they—and tell them they must start installing the new drill in a month."

"We write and telephone alternately," said Evelyn. "They're very civil and optimistic, but there's always some fresh priority cropping up."

"I'll priority 'em. By gum, I'll—— Now, look here, young Evelyn, just tell 'em if they play any more monkey-tricks I'll take over the works and put in a manager. Then I'll get up in the House and say I did it because they weren't up to scratch. Get me?"

"Yes."

"How's labour in proportion to 1941?"

"Twenty per cent up."

"Hm, production ^{up} five per cent and labour twenty. Not so good."

"But it's very diluted labour," said Thais, trying to make things look less black.

"Course it's diluted. We're all diluted till we're nine parts water."

"And then," said Thais, "there is a certain amount of it which isn't—er—directly productive. The orchestra's the best in the East Midlands, but it has to do a lot of performing outside and it goes in for competitions. Then there's the welfare personnel, canteens, whole-time spotters and firemen, and the Home Guard headquarters. They're all on the strength."

The Minister sighed. If there was anything in the world he hated it was this question of increasing production. His job would have been interesting without it; but it kept bobbing up at the most inopportune moments. Thais, who realized this fully, wished she could have stopped Evelyn from starting the wretched subject.

"As a matter of fact," said Mr. Peppercorn, "although

increased production is very important—I suppose in a way you may say it's the most important thing of all—I wasn't thinking of it just at this very moment."

"Ah," said Thais, noting the obvious relief in his voice.

"No," said Mr. Peppercorn, "I was thinking of something else, a new aspect of planning."

This was better ground. This was more satisfactory.

"At first," went on Mr. Peppercorn, "we had to plan for existence. Then we had to plan for victory. We've got to keep on doing that, of course. But victory's in sight now, so we've got to do a bit more. We've got to plan for peace."

Thais drew her breath sharply, and a cock pheasant gabbled what sounded remarkably like applause.

"Yes," said the statesman, "I'm forming a committee of the heads of departments and a section in each of the chief branches to work out with trade and industry what we shall want in peace. All except you, of course, are groups of industries. You're on your own because monobelium's on its own, and you'll have your own planning section. It will have to keep in close touch with the others, taking its instructions from the committee and reporting to it, but it will work under your own eye, and you can give it a nucleus of your own staff who know what it's all about. I leave the layout to you, but the sort of thing I have in mind is a section of three subsections. One would collect information about the distribution of monobelium before the war, instances of waste, etcetera. Another would collate the ideas of the users. The third would be publicity. That you'd have to keep quite small."

"Do our own publicity?" gasped Thais. This was all too good to be true. She feared it was all a dream and that she would presently wake up.

"Yes, press and advertising. Shick's got a bright feller, he tells me, that he's been training up. Name of Mosenthal or something. We've got to get something into the technical trade papers. Got anyone in mind to manage the new section? No, well you'll have to thrash all that out with Skinner and Plumpton and Longman. That's not the Minister's job."

"Of course not, sir," said Thais, who had been doing some quick thinking and realized that opportunities like this did not come round often and that Skinner, Plumpton, and Longman were weak reeds to the stout oak of Mr. Peppercorn. "We won't worry you, and we're very proud that we can carry on so much on our own. But there's just one thing we may want your help on because no one else is really big enough to help us. It's accommodation. We shall want three more flats in our block, and the three best have got an overflow from the Ministry of Propaganda, for foreigners of some sort."

"Ah," said Mr. Peppercorn, "that's not quite so easy. You can throw an Englishman out of anything in war-time, but when it comes to a foreigner it's another matter. Thank God it's the Ministry of Propaganda, because you can always raise a good laugh about that if there's any trouble. Damme, I'll throw 'em out however foreign they are! Have a letter drafted for me on Monday. Bless my soul, the whole future of the country depends on how we plan the peace and we find some damned foreigners from the Ministry of Propaganda stopping us from doing it! I'll have 'em thrown out."

Having taken that little precaution Thais was wise enough to let the matter drop and return to the generalities of planning which to Mr. Peppercorn—and not to him alone—were always so much pleasanter than the technicalities of action. They had an interesting and instruc-

tive talk, returning through the woods just in time to meet the more pious section of the house-party coming back from church.

There was talk that night of the best country-house week-end quality. Ordinarily it would have thrilled Thais, who loved to see the world. But now she hardly heard. A charge was laid upon her, the weight of which staggered her. She was to plan the peace.

CHAPTER XV

A HARD DAY'S WORK

JOHN CARSTAIRS had business to keep him at home for another day, and Lady Eva had invited Mrs. Allardyce to stay and return with him on Tuesday, but most of the party were going back to London on Monday morning, and they travelled together in a saloon attached to the train in honour of Mr. Peppercorn. He was met by his car, which, by virtue of its red "priority" label, elbowed its way through the other transport. Those of Sir Jeremy Plumpton and Colonel Volkhov were also present, though somewhat less prominent. Altogether there was an important bustle and much popular interest as they alighted. It was pleasant not to have to queue for a taxi, but Evelyn and Thais knew that the motto of all good commissars was *noblesse oblige* and that the privilege would have to be paid for in hard work that day.

They were whirled off to the Ministry, where Mr. Peppercorn's first act was to sign the requisition for the three flats needed to house the Peace-planning Section—

as it was decided to call it—of Evelyn's branch. At eleven Evelyn attended a conference for the setting up of the Committee of the Heads of Departments. Here he sat in modest silence and felt little wiser about the matter in hand when it was over. However, that was of small importance. At twelve there was a second conference on their own special affairs, which was the real thing. This time Thais, business-like with large note-book and three fountain-pens, attended as secretary.

She had the demand for the new establishment ready, and it was promptly passed, though the acquirement of the actual bodies was a different matter. This Evelyn took it upon himself to do, or rather that it should be done—by Thais, though he naturally did not say so. She had roughed out an outline of policy, which Evelyn read from her notes. It was accepted, after some long-winded comments by Sir Jeremy Plumpton. She had coached Evelyn in a demand for an entertainment allowance, which she considered indispensable for the publicity side. She had had small experience of the advertising world, but she was an observant girl and had come to the conclusion that publicity and whisky were inseparable, and that publicity and luncheons were desirable companions. Evelyn put forward the suggestion with some hesitation, and was horrified but not surprised when it was sharply criticised by the head of the Finance Department. He was delighted and surprised when the Minister came down like a load of bricks upon the luckless economizer and accused him of trifling. The allowance must be granted, but strict accounts must be kept and rendered to the Finance Department.

When it was over they had got what they wanted, but the real work was only just beginning. The conference had but given them an outline, and it was for them to

fill it in. But the first filling-in had to be that of their stomachs, an urgent matter because they had breakfasted very early at Carstairs Hall. Once again Evelyn marvelled at the foresight of Thais, who, he discovered, had telegraphed from Peterborough Station to reserve a table for two at the Virginia Creeper.

"What on earth made you think of that, darling, and why the Creeper?" he asked in the taxi.

"Well, you see, darling, I realized this was going to be a terrific day and that we should want a good luncheon. Then, about the Creeper, I thought you and I were at a rather critical moment in our career, on the eve of a wonderful success or an almighty crash, and that we should make a function of it by choosing a good place."

"Darling, you're a lamb!" said Evelyn fervently, and embraced her.

"Darling, you make me quite dizzy!"

No one would have thought so to see them at luncheon. Amid actresses bleating about their indifferent clothes, Thais was severely practical and talked shop. By the time they reached their coffee she had actually got out a note-book. Nevertheless they enjoyed their luncheon greatly and made of it a genuinely ceremonial occasion. They returned refreshed to deal with the further problems of the day.

First of all they inspected the flats to be taken over from the foreigners of the Ministry of Propaganda. Evelyn was interested to find that they consisted of the Turkish Sub-Section, Section of Foreign Information, which he had visited at the invitation of Mr. Twaddle soon after taking up his appointment. It was still a modest organism, having increased only from four men and six typists to nine men and twelve typists in the long intervening period. Like the first flat which he had taken

over from Lieutenant-Colonel de Sotteville of les Français Enchainés, the premises contained one attractively furnished double bedroom, which the head of the sub-section explained was intended for fire-watchers. He was the soul of politeness, this head of the sub-section. Though he had not yet heard of his impending eviction from the relatively comfortable quarters occupied by his staff, he took it philosophically, which may have been due to the fact that his maternal grandfather had been Turkish, the remainder of his ancestry being obscure but undeniably Levantine. He had, it appeared, been hopefully preparing or commissioning articles for the Turkish press ever since Evelyn had met him, though dogged by the competition of the Turkish Sub-section, Section of European Information, which also, it may be recalled, formed part of the Ministry of Propaganda.

Hurrying back to their own office, Thais summoned Mr. Plimsole, who had been in charge during their visit to the Mediterranean, and set him to work with his secretary, who has already been described as an efficient girl and enjoying the confidence of Thais, on the allocation of office space. She and Evelyn then went back to the Ministry in the office car—she had got her way about that—to meet the Establishment Officer in yet another conference on the subject of staff.

The Establishment Officer, always ready to help her, was inclined to shake his head over the prospects. Clerical staff was hard to get and executive almost impossible.

"You see," he said sadly, "we've got to a stage when every man or woman who's worth a tinker's curse and an incalculable number who aren't are fixed up already. There's just a small floating population which goes round from job to job, but you can take it from me that most of it is either stupid, sick, idle, drunken, or dishonest,

and some of it combines all these little failings. However, I'll do my level best to sift out a few decent ones for you for the more senior posts."

Thais shook her head.

"I'm afraid that's not good enough. I know the floating population almost as well as you do. It's hopeless. We'll have to collect people who are holding down decent jobs already."

"Quite impossible, my dear."

"Nothing is impossible for me," said Thais simply and without conceit, and Evelyn murmured: "Hear! Hear!"

"First of all," she continued, "we'll go to Lydia Skitish at the Ministry of Employment. She's under some obligation to me."

The Establishment Officer looked surprised. It then flashed into the mind of Evelyn that several months ago he and Thais had dined with the fair Lydia and a young man of surpassing good looks and complete imbecility, a fellow-worker in the Ministry of Employment. This young man had later on been posted to the Monobelium Branch of the Ministry of Armaments and Supply. After about a fortnight Thais had reported that he had better be returned whence he came. Evelyn had suggested that his probation had not been very long, to which she had replied that it had been long enough to show him to be of no particular use. It now occurred to Evelyn that the youth might have been a dismissed lover whose lady had quickly decided that she wanted him back. If so, she was now about to be called upon to show her gratitude by surrendering some of the slaves whose destinies were entrusted to her by a conscribed nation.

"Yes," said Thais, "I fancy she'll be good for five or six bodies better than the average. If she can't produce enough I think I can find a few here and there. Especi-

ally from the Press for the Publicity Sub-section. *The Jupiter*," she added viciously, "didn't give a line to our tour in the Mediterranean. I believe I'd try to get its Military Correspondent called up if he wasn't rather a highbrow. We must have publicity men who talk straight without qualification, and anyway I don't think monobelum would mix well with Clausewitz and Foch."

"Well, my dear," said the Establishment Officer, "I needn't tell you that the more you can do about finding your own bodies the better I shall be pleased. What about the clerical staff? There we have two alternatives: elderly ladies and kids straight from the correspondence schools."

"Kids. Kids every time. You can teach them something. And the others, poor darlings, spend half their time standing in queues to get their husbands' dinners."

"I couldn't agree with you more," said Evelyn. "Let's have kids. I infinitely prefer them."

"Oh, you do, do you," said Thais coldly. "Then let me tell you you're not going to be allowed near any of them. You spoil them horribly," she added as an afterthought, observing that her display of jealousy was causing the Establishment Officer some quiet amusement.

She then talked gently but firmly to Lydia Skittish for half an hour with effect not altogether unsatisfactory. So far so good, but the ordinary affairs of the branch had not been dealt with yet. They spent the rest of the afternoon and evening up to their necks in current affairs, Thais giving decisions and dictating letter after letter with the speed of a machine-gun to typist after typist. At seven o'clock they went out and had a couple of drinks, then made their way over to the Ministry once more and had a meal in its canteen. Then they returned to Rothbury Mansions for their next task, the

preparation of an outline of office organization and duties. As they re-entered the block, now almost deserted and in darkness, the sirens began their horrible howling. The Germans had lately begun a series of fighter-bomber raids which London was finding unsettling.

They were neither of them easily scared, though they both experienced that uncomfortable feeling in the stomach, as if its contents were slowly turning over, which came to all who had listened too often to the sirens' song. They sat down to work again, Thais merely remarking that if the building got hit no one would come to look for them because no one would know they were in it.

"I believe there's a fire-watcher on the roof," said Evelyn. "I'll ring—Golly! Under the table!"

Before the shriek had ended, to be followed by a crash, they had dived under from either side and bumped their heads. They rubbed them as they came out and started the usual argument as to whether the bomb had fallen more or less than a quarter of a mile away. They then began to work once more till interrupted by a jagged fragment of shell coming through the window. Evelyn did now venture to suggest that they might call it a day, but the invincible Thais insisted that they should continue. The firing came to an end; the "all clear" was sounded; the streets began to echo to the sound of people scurrying home in the blackout; that died down too and all was silence. Still those two devoted souls slaved on. Presently Evelyn shifted his left arm slightly on the table, and Thais was down on him like a knife.

"I know what you're doing!" she cried. "Trying to look at your wrist-watch without my seeing you do it. Well, I can't be too cross because you've really been very good. What is the time?"

He told her it was half-past ten. She lit a cigarette and stretched her arms above her head.

"I wish," she said, "we could have some of the people here who say the Civil Service can't do a job of work. Your mother, for instance."

"Anybody," said Evelyn sapiently, "can do a job of work and enjoy it if it's interesting enough in the first place and increases his own importance enough in the second. You wouldn't be sitting here at half-past ten, with no overtime pay, if you were one of the typists, now, would you? You enjoy this because it gives you a terrific sense of power."

"Darling, I never heard you say such a mouthful about anything. I suppose you're right. But the power isn't everything, you know. I don't think I should worry about it if it wasn't——"

"Well?"

"If it wasn't for you, darling."

This statement had the effect which might have been expected—and perhaps was expected by Thais. In a moment she had been gathered up in Evelyn's arms, seated on his knee, and fervently embraced. Custom had not staled the pleasure which she took in that experience and she could stand any amount of it. Evelyn, however, was in pensive mood to-night and had not bestowed more than about a hundred kisses upon her when he broke off, with Thais ready and willing for quantities more, to remark:

"Darling, I'm not saying you don't love me——"

"You darn well better not."

"I know you do. But I sometimes can't help feeling that you mightn't love me quite so much if it weren't for that sense of power. I mean, I'm not quite a fool, though I know I look it, and I realize that I'm only an

instrument and a figure-head in all this work. You're the real mover. I doubt if I should even think it worth while if it wasn't for you."

"You mean to say I use you to increase my power and fall in love with you in the process?"

"Something like that."

"Darling, that's a dreadful accusation. I won't deny it because no one can say why they love or why they don't. But I think it's rather horrid. Anyhow, haven't you any ambition yourself? Don't you like making the wheels go round? And if you don't get that sort of kick, don't you feel proud of the public work we're doing? It's getting terrific now."

"That's just the trouble, darling," said Evelyn with an unhappy air. "I don't get quite all the satisfaction I ought out of it because I never can really *see* why it's so important. Mind you," he added hastily, realizing that this was blasphemous talk, "I do firmly believe that it's as big as you say it is. It's just that I don't seem to have the imagination to see it in its true light. It's asinine of me, I know, but somehow it does take away a bit of the excitement I ought to feel about our progress. I mean, I enjoy it all ever so much, but I can't get absolutely fanatical about it. So much of it seems to consist of circulating information which really doesn't matter very much."

Thais embarked upon an exposition of the value of the Monobelium Branch to the nation and the war effort which, unless this account has been lamentably inadequate, must by now be so obvious to the reader that he may be spared the full recapitulation of her arguments. It may be mentioned, however, that she laid particular stress upon the importance of circulating information.

"You ought to have realized by now, darling, that

nine-tenths of all the Government departments spend their whole time circulating and reading information. The average under-secretary reads papers about nine hours a day; otherwise he couldn't keep up with what's going on."

"Would that matter frightfully?" asked Evelyn stubbornly.

Patiently Thais returned to the charge. She marshalled her points with her usual lucidity. They appeared to make a considerable impression on Evelyn, until he was seized with an irresistible desire to kiss the lobe of her ear. That broke up the discussion. It need hardly be said that they decided, after so long a day's work and with another of like nature in prospect, not to put themselves to the fatigue of going home that night.

In the small hours of the morning, when spirits are at their lowest, Thais awoke. One of those traitorous and unworthy thoughts which pervade the small hours of the morning assailed her. Had not Evelyn shown exasperating limitations? Was he not a little stupid in this matter? Was he not worse than a little stupid, a bit of a bore? Surely he could not be completely in the dark about the need for war planning and organization. Surely he understood what total war was. Then she heard him move and sigh softly, like a child, in his sleep. The sound instantly brought her to herself. She drove out the unworthy thought with passion.

But it had got in. For the first time, for the very first time since that far-off day when she had entered his room at the Ministry and had seen him standing there, "terribly sweet but terribly simple", as she had confided to that cat Myra Cuning—how badly that girl had turned out!—and had seen the wave in his golden hair, she had doubted and criticized. That was all over now, but it

had happened, and what has once happened can never be expunged from the records. She shuddered with horror before she again fell asleep.

CHAPTER XVI

UP AND UP AND UP, AND ON AND ON AND ON

"PARTHIANS and Medes and Elamites—how does it go?—and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, and what have you," said Thais, who had once had a fair Biblical education. "No one can say we shall lack variety. A very mixed lot!"

They had been interviewing candidates for the new section, and these certainly were a mixed lot. They were not the throw-outs with whom the Establishment Officer had threatened them—Thais and Lydia Skittish had seen to that. They even included one distinguished "leftist" intellectual who had fled to the United States on the outbreak of war and fled back again to avoid being called up by the Americans; but their origins were in several cases dubious.

"I suppose," she went on, "they're all British subjects. We ought to have found that out. But there's one at all events I think it'd be safer not to take."

'Bloke with the long hair?" asked Evelyn.

Yes, Fleischer's the name. Says he came over because he hated Hitler. May be all right, but how do we know it wasn't because Hitler hated him? On security grounds we'd be better without him. It's not as if we were keep-

ing him out of a job, because actually he can choose between half a dozen. Then there's another I'm sure's in the Black Market. You remember when I went to that place in the City and bought a dress length from stock which was supposed to have been damaged by fire? They'd wet the stuff for the look of the thing. Well, that creature was in the warehouse. I never forget faces. And I loathe anything to do with the Black Market," Thais concluded virtuously.

"Let's keep the genuine British among them and if we're short ask for more," said Evelyn. "You know I can't stand foreigners."

"Darling, you are a real prejudiced, pig-headed reactionary!"

"But don't you hate them too, in your heart of hearts?"

"Well, I think they're a bit awful myself. If God had never made any we should be spared a lot of troubles, including wars. But we must be broad minded."

"Not in the office. Anywhere else you like, but not in the office. Come in!"

It was Mr. Mosenthal, Mr. Shick's protégé, come to be interviewed with a view to being appointed head of the publicity sub-section. He was rather like Mr. Shick himself, minus the latter's comparative respectability but possessing in exchange a more friendly and companionable air. He was a grown up version of the more engaging type of Whitechapel Jewish *gamin*, sharp as a needle, intensely curious, full of altruism so long as it remained without detriment to himself or his race. He listened, smiling and with his head on one side, while Thais explained the sort of publicity work done by the Branch so far.

"Yes, yes, yes, that's all fine. That's all ole Shick, I can see that, and ole Shick knows his onions. Shick's good on what you call direct approach. Good he is.

And direct approach is good. You can't do without it. I suggest we carry on on those lines, miss. But there's more in it than that nowadays."

"Indirect approach?" asked Evelyn, wondering what it was.

"Mr. Mosenthal nodded and winked. "Yes, and that's where dear ole Shick's jes' a little ole fashioned, if you follow me, miss. Now I've bin a war correspondent, I have. Had to give it up about a little misunderstanding about a message that they said beat the pistol. In fac', I don't mind telling you, miss, between these four walls, that ole Lysander sent me 'ome. Jes' a little misunderstanding, it was."

They murmured something sympathetic, Evelyn wondering how Mr. Mosenthal had come off in those barter transactions that he had heard of in Italy and concluding that it had probably been well enough.

"Well I learnt a bit about indirect approach. How they built up the generals, frinstance."

"But do they build them up?" asked the innocent Evelyn. "I thought the generals were terrified of the Press and only submitted to interviews for the good of the Army."

Mr. Mosenthal leered.

"Terrified? Yep, they're terrified to start with, but it don't last. Some ladies—'scuse me, miss—is frightened to go to bed the first time, but once they got the habit you can't stop 'em. Generals is like that. They start by being scared of this funny thing we call publicity, but when they've had a bit of it it gets into their system like a drug and they can't do without it."

"Very interesting," said Evelyn. Human nature, I suppose."

"I'll say it's interesting," said Mr. Mosenthal. "The

way they work for it, some of 'em! I could tell you a tale or two—but this is bithness. The point is that even where you get a general who doesn't want to be built up he still has to be. It's the politicians who give the orders."

"But why do the politicians boost the generals?" asked the now thoroughly bewildered Evelyn.

"Jes' to make the people and the troops feel good and to show how clever the politicians were to find 'em. But if they drop 'em it's wonderful how quick they do their unbuilding. Lightning demolition it is. But I still haven't told you about what I call indirect approach. You see, the direct stuff, hand-outs and all that, soon gets a bit too obvious. The Press and the public can't absorb more'n a certain proportion before they get saturated."

"I suppose they would," said Evelyn.

"Yes, sir." (Mr. Mosenthal became very American at times.) "But they can absorb quite a bit extra if it comes in an unusual way—personal appeal, you see, miss. So one day the general when he sees a warco. passing stops his car and says howdy and things is good and going better and nuts to Hitler. And that warco. is tickled to death and runs for his typewriter, and starts off: 'I had a long talk with General Puffer to-day on my way up to the line.' (Warcos. are always going up the line, of course. There was one I remember you couldn't prise out of Cairo with a jemmy and who was that well known to the barmen that they began mixing his drink when he was a hundred yards off, but you'd think from that guy's pieces that he'd never been out of the desert since the war began.) Well, then there's a long chat of this and that, and the editor says it's a good story and the public sucks it up too."

"I see," said Evelyn.

"But that's not the only way," went on Mr. Mosenthal. "Every now and again some staff officer gets told to give an exclusive talk to some likely warco. or mebbe a couple. And he slips in a word about 'the chief'. And that warco. gets something which is better'n a bottle of fizz, a little personal information. Sometimes it's off the record, but even when it is he's as pleased as a dog with two tails and any way he can store it up for his next book on Lysander and Me. And he feels so good about it that the next time he has to mention the Chief he says what a hellova guy he is and how he makes his staff do this and that. And then if the warco.'s a very good boy perhaps the Chief gets the tip to ask him to lunch or dinner."

"The personal touch," said Thais.

"That's it. And there are other little stunts too. Now we'll say the Ministry of Propaganda commissions some guy to write a piece about the general for its paper in Russia. Well, perhaps one of the Russian papers quotes a bit out of it. It's not often because the Russians don't think much of any generals but their own, but it may happen. Then the Ministry sends out a story and says, 'You see what a hellova chap the Russians think the General is,' and the papers think it sounds better coming from the Russians than if it had come straight from the Ministry or from the guy that first wrote it."

It is needless to say that Mr. Mosenthal was engaged on the spot and bidden to find his own staff as far as possible. It is equally needless to say that it was decided to conduct the publicity of the Section on the dual lines which he had indicated, that is, not to neglect the old-time hand-outs but also to establish the personal touch both with journalists interested in metallurgy and with the industrialists themselves. How wise they had been

to get the entertainment allowance passed! So eager was Thais to get to work on the side of indirect approach that she had hardly got rid of Mr. Mosenthal before she started planning the first luncheon party, which she had already decided should be held in a private room at the Savoy.

During the next few days painters came in and obliterated the traces of the previous tenants, who had been somewhat uncleanly in their habits, in the new flats. They were succeeded by cleaners who obliterated the traces of the painters. Then the new furniture arrived. Typewriters were obtained somehow or another in a world where it seemed they no longer existed. Telephones were installed. The engagement of the staff went on parallel with these preparations, so that by the time they were finished the men and women were ready to sit in the "austerity" chairs and write on the "utility" desks. Moreover, the seniors had been carefully coached by Thais in odd half hours, with the result that they were able to hand out work straight away and there were none of the delays which so often occur in the opening of new offices. It was, indeed, an astonishing achievement. Mr. Peppercorn was so condescending as to come round and have a look on the first afternoon. He went from room to room and from flat to flat, and came away delighted. Before he left he drew Evelyn aside and informed him under pledge of secrecy that he was recommending him for the C.B.E. and Thais for the M.B.E.

Mr. Peppercorn's enthusiasm was well justified. Rothbury Mansions was now a veritable hive of industry. The staff now at work numbered no less than seventy-five: thirty-six of them concerned with the distribution of monobelium; sixteen engaged upon historical investiga-

tion, mainly statistical; sixteen dealing with manufacturers about the needs of industry after the war; and seven on the publicity side. There were typewriters galore and duplicators. There were over twenty-five telephones. A small canteen had been installed in the basement, and though it always diffused a smell of cabbage it was undoubtedly a great convenience. Thais, always kindly, had hoped to obtain the whole-time services of a female welfare officer, and though the ruling went that the establishment was not large enough to be entitled to a lady on full time, it was arranged that one should come over for two hours each day from the Ministry. The physical and indeed the moral welfare of the staff under her control were ever matters of moment to Thais. It much distressed her, for instance, when one evening she called in at the White Lion for a glass of sherry with Evelyn, to find an American treating her typist to that deadly form of drink known as a "chaser", of beer and whisky. But what could one do? G.I.s would be G.I.s. She just looked reprovingly at the typist and made a martyr of herself by ordering, instead of the sherry to which she had looked forward, a glass of disgusting synthetic lemonade, in the hope of setting a good example.

Sometimes she would steal five minutes from her unending toil to sit in mental contemplation of her handiwork—for she was too honest to deny to herself that it was hers alone. It really was terrific. The stationery orders had gone up 123 per cent since the move to Rothbury Mansions. The incoming mail was carried in by the postman in a large canvas bag and the outgoing carried out by a clerk in the largest wicker waste-paper basket available. Evelyn and his principal assistants saw a dozen visitors a day, though she had engaged a clever and

experienced girl, once secretary to a newspaper editor, to keep out the undesirables, the time-wasters, and the bores. The publicity "results" had soared upwards under the influence of Mr. Mosenthal within a relatively few weeks of his arrival. More than ever of them were to be found in the popular Press, and in addition the scientific and trade papers were now full of them. There was one article which gave Thais infinite pleasure on account of the following passage:

$$P_{12} = \frac{\left(\frac{p_2^2}{p b^{p-5}} + \frac{b_2^2}{b c^{c-5}} - \frac{2(p+b+c)}{\left(\frac{pbc}{2}\right)^{p-10}} \right) \frac{n}{(p-4)(b-3)(c-2)}}{S \frac{spbc}{p^b + p^c + b^p + b^c + c^b + c^p}}$$

This, it was stated, was the formula of McCaskie, which could be accepted as correct to within a millionth. ("Now what could possibly be fairer than that?" asked Thais.) Müller had raised some objections. ("Up with McCaskie!" said Thais, "and death to Müller! He was probably a Boche anyhow.") This certainly was one of those articles which gave tone to the proceedings.

She often stayed on at the office after the staff had all gone, sometimes after Evelyn himself had departed. What a sight it was, the little torrent of men and women pouring out into the street, scurrying off in hopes of getting home before the siren sounded—and it had become all too frequent these winter nights! She would stand on the balcony to watch them go, and it would thrill her through and through to feel that they, having watched the clock minute by minute, were abandoning the great task almost as it struck the hour, whereas she, with no thought of hours but inspired solely by the majesty of the

responsibility laid upon her, was immersed in toil. How grand a thing it was to live for one's work instead of merely working for one's livelihood! (Actually her own salary, and Evelyn's too, had gone up with the latest expansion, in accordance with the well-established and sound principle of the Civil Service that, the bigger the staff, the more the man at the top gets.)

When they had all gone she would stand for a little while looking out over blacked-out London and listening to the scraps of conversation from typical Londoners of war-time which came up to her out the darkness.

"Chi vuol far, vadia, e chi non vuol far, mandi."

"Woot you please dell me de name of dis street, what?"

"Butter kauf 'ich natürlich im schwarze Markt; Eier aber bekomme ich im graue."

"Gee, I gonna say that dame's the biggest bitch west of the Mississippi, and then some."

"Marianne est partie, hélas! Maintenant, faute de mieux, je couche avec sa soeur."

Then she would walk through the rooms. The immensity of the undertaking was brought home to her even more closely when all was silent and the only reminder of the departed staff was the smell of clothes which had seen too much service. Row on row, the typewriters stood sheathed in their shining black armour, like knights resting between battles. In trays beside them lay half-finished work. She would pull out the smooth-running drawers containing the card-indexes and gloat over the vast amount of material inside, though indeed, she reflected, it often took an unconscionably long time to find correspondence wanted in a hurry. That was due to lack of training; one girl had indexed correspondence with the Newcastle Small Arms Company partly under

"Newcastle", partly under "Small", and partly under "Arms". One could not have perfection, but one approached it more closely each day. Perhaps she would have an expert on card-indexes called up from Harrods.

The great machine was silent, and it seemed even more impressive, though in so different a way, than when it was clattering in the daytime. Now, too, with the distractions of working hours absent, was the time for yet more planning. She kept one drawer in her desk which she called her "project drawer". It contained many single sheets of paper, on which were projects ranging from brief notes to large diagrams. A satisfactory number of them were assembled in a folder on which was written in red pencil the single triumphant word "Done". She would go through the others in the hope of fattening it still further, but alas! they nearly all called for more staff, and she realized they would have to wait a little after the last great expansion. Further demands might be listened to, but it would be unwise to press them just yet. However, one of her projects involved the taking over of the whole building and the elevation of Evelyn to the rank of deputy director. If that could be attained she felt she would have no further ambitions.

Meanwhile there were setbacks which would have tried the patience of a saint. The new drill for the mine, of which they had been talking since the outbreak of war, had been completed at last, but had been shipped to the United States by mistake. It could not be stopped on its way to New York, but there was some hope of getting it back in about six weeks. A sneak who strayed upon news of this incident reported it to that tiresome M.P., Captain Chutney, who of course promptly put down a question. However, he was firmly dealt with. This wrote for Mr. Peppercorn an answer that there was no

truth in the allegations of negligence; certain machinery had indeed been sent to America in exchange for certain other machinery which could be better produced in that country. In reply to a supplementary question the Ministry contrived to criticize the conduct of those who created harmful rumours in time of war. To defeat the sneak, in case he was still on the watch, the drill was removed from its British case and packed in an American one before being shipped back to Glasgow.

CHAPTER XVII

UNWORTHY DOUBTS

EVELYN was dining with his mother and their friend Lady O'Hara in the St. John's Wood flat. The dinner was simple, but if the incidental expenses had been counted would have been found costly, since Mrs. Allardyce, after beating an American soldier by a short head for a taxi, had kept it for the whole of her morning's shopping and driven back in triumph with a well-filled basket, and her feet, which, poor lady, had become her chief preoccupation of late, in fairly good shape. London was once more free from air attacks, but there were some nasty whispers about a new weapon, weighing anything from one to ten tons according to the imagination of the informant, with which the Germans were reported to be about to attack Southern England. The other topic of conversation was the coming invasion of western Europe.

Having exhausted these themes, including that of Mrs.

Allardyce's feet, a subject which always had to be treated with the greatest reverence, they talked of the remarkable development of the Monobelium Branch of the Ministry of Armaments and Supply. Two great events had just taken place almost simultaneously: Evelyn had received the C.B.E. and the staff had reached the hundred mark. Mrs. Allardyce, a cricket enthusiast and frequent visitor to Lord's in days of peace, had clapped her hands and exclaimed: "Well played, sir! Oh, well played, sir!" when she had heard about the century and had opined that after having made that record safe Evelyn should proceed to hit the bowling all over the field. The height to which her son, in whom she had not previously detected the makings of a great administrator, had attained in the course of three years had astonished her somewhat, but not as much as would have been the case had she been of a less cynical turn of mind.

"What I'm wondering now," she said, "is whether the time hasn't come for you to start something quite different. You've done well, you and that girl of yours—though how much is you and how much is her I can't quite decide—but it seems to me you may have got to the end of your possible progress and as far as you can get."

"But, Mother, what else could I possibly do? Monobelium's the thing I know about. Anyhow I'm frozen stiff like everybody else. I couldn't make a change if I wanted to."

"Pouf!" said Mrs. Allardyce. "Your Thais could thaw any ice."

("How right you are!" thought Evelyn to himself.)

"Well, aren't you beginning to get stuck in a rut?" asked his mother. "What special business have you in hand, now?"

Evelyn thought for a moment.

"Well, everything we started last winter's still in hand," he said. "It's so big that we don't need to look for much more. But one of the things we're now trying to tackle is the allotment of monobelium to the Empire after the war."

"I declare to goodness, Evelyn," said Lady O'Hara, "when you talk about the Empire you begin to chant like a parson intoning the Litany. It's a habit of the English to get sentimental about it. The thing has got holy, somehow or another, so it has. An' it's only in the lifetime of old creatures like me that this has happened. Now, what was the Empire in the last century? A place where you got rid of the bad boys. A place where a few good boys of the right sort of family got good jobs. A place where you got tea. The idea was always to get something, from the Spaniards or the Portuguese or the natives. Now I'd say the Empire was won by acquisitiveness."

"Nothing disgraceful in that, Maureen," said Mrs. Allardyce.

"Nothing at all, God bless you. But I'm not so sure this minnut that there isn't something disgraceful in grabbing a thing because you want it an' then working up a legend about it, pretending that you took it over entirely for its own good, an' pretending too that the 'pioneers of Empire', as you call them, had a great vision of imperial destiny. The most of them had a vision of settling down at home in a nice house with a nice fat wife and a good cellar. How on earth the English, who've no more imagination than bullocks, ever thought of imperial destiny I'm sure I don't know. Perhaps it was because the idea was put into their heads by an Iberian Jew called Disraeli. It's a wonderful piece of legend-making anyway."

"And we're supposed to be so bad at that beside the Irish," said Mrs. Allardyce viciously.

"Ah, the Irish. Blather comes naturally to them, God knows, only sometimes they blather with their tongue in their cheek. But for all they're so sentimental, the sentiment isn't quite so solemn as it is here. By all means send out a few cargoes of your nasty stuff to the Empire, Evelyn, but don't lose your sense of humour."

"He's got precious little," said Evelyn's mother.

"You're both very hard on me," said Evelyn. "I only said, after all, that we were trying to make out how much monobelium the Empire would need after the war."

"Yes, but it's all part of this legend I've been talking about. You think the bit that goes to the Empire is sacred, but the bit that goes to China or Peru is just ordinary stuff without any magic virtues. Now I think that's a bad sign, so I do. I think your mother may be right and that it's time you tried something else."

"I've been wondering whether I really ought to go back to the Army," Evelyn ventured to say.

Both women greeted this extraordinary announcement with the alarm and scorn which it merited. Mrs. Allardyce pointed out how wasteful it would be for one who had acquired so much experience of administration and was now at the head of a vital branch of the most vital of all ministries to join the Army and fight as a private soldier or even as a subaltern. Lady O'Hara also disapproved, but she was not so sure that the country would collapse and the war would be lost but for the existence of the Monobelium Branch and the presence of Evelyn at the head of it. He wished that he had Thais at hand to put her right in this matter.

To tell truth, he was a little worried and restless. John Carstairs had watched the progress of the Monobelium

Branch for three years without comment. Evelyn sometimes thought there had been an ironical expression on his face when he spoke of its affairs, but then this was not uncommon, though most unjust and improper, on the part of civilians discussing government departments. Last week, however, he had written a letter, civil but critical, in which he pointed out that production was the essential thing and that the increasing staff was not raising it. ("Just the typical business man's attitude!" Thais had said as she read the letter. "Evelyn, darling, I'm afraid your cousin is getting a bit of a blimp.")

Cousin John had actually gone on to question the post-war planning. There had never been any difficulty about allocation in the years before the war, he had written, and he did not see why there should be after it was over. He actually looked forward to an eventual raising of controls and considered that when he had a free hand and a proper staff Carstairs and Sons would be quite capable of selling their ore. They would, of course, always consult the Ministry of External Relations or the Ministry of Commerce before they sent a consignment to a country or to an individual firm about which there was the slightest doubt from the point of view of public policy. But this would be only a matter of answering a simple question and would not require a staff, still less a planning staff.

The noble indignation of Thais on reading this astounding communication had been good to see. Evelyn had never known her to be so moved by anger. If, she had said, John Carstairs thought that the controls were coming off after the war, then he was indeed grossly mistaken. They were on for his lifetime at all events, and the mine would probably be nationalized before he died. Even if that did not occur, his monopoly would be the last to

be set free. The man was behind the times; he had not kept up with the recent movement of ideas. Nobody was going to be allowed to exploit a monopoly uncontrolled nowadays. She really thought she would send him a selection of the books of that admirable publisher Grossbart on the present trend of political thought. There was one by that forcible writer Wellington Boot called "Tories are worse than Nazis" which would teach him a number of things he ought to know. (She had once seen Mr. Boot being "briefed" by Mr. Grossbart in the Virginia Creeper and had decided that there must be something in left-wing political literature since it could lunch so respectably.) No, Thais had said, if they had to set up a whole ministry to deal with monopolism after the war, they would do so rather than let Carstairs and Sons go uncontrolled. Evelyn had dutifully agreed, even though a little wistfully, since it had occurred to him as possible that he might eventually have been taken into partnership. In a sense, therefore, he was queering his own pitch by his patriotism in favouring the continuance of the controls after the war.

Nevertheless, one way or another, through his own doubts, his feeling that he ought to be in the Army, his mother's suggestion that he should break new ground, and even the typically Irish jibes of Lady O'Hara at the expense of imperial sentiment, he was disturbed and confused in mind. The expression of bewilderment upon his open countenance had become more marked and permanent. In ordinary circumstances he would have confided in the Minister, who had of late taken an almost fatherly interest in him. Unfortunately, however, a recent tragedy had separated him from his master and preceptor and had to a large extent withdrawn the latter temporarily from mundane affairs.

Mrs. Peppercorn had died. The cause of her death, in the strictly medical sense, was unknown to the office, but in lay terms, strange though it might appear, she had died of being the wife of a Cabinet Minister. Mrs. Peppercorn had never taken to London or to ministerial life or to her chromium-plated flat. She had missed her roses, her irises, her Michaelmas daisies, her dahlias and chrysanthemums, at Surbiton, as well as her quiet tea-parties in her old circle of friends. All, all were gone, the old familiar faces. She had found few compensations in her husband's importance because she was devoid of ambition. It has been remarked in passing that she did not accompany her husband to luncheon at the Virginia Creeper and that he sometimes had another, a blonde partner, when he visited that pleasant restaurant; but it would be unfair to suppose that this was proof of his partner in marriage being neglected or deprived of entertainment. She would not have found in the Creeper the happiness she had lost. She did not complain, but just passed quietly away from a world which was strange to her and seemed to have no place for her.

For a short time the widower had been inconsolable. To a man of his active mind, however, moping was a phase which could not long endure. He had suddenly thrown himself into a new interest, the future of his political career and his party after the war. Mr. Peppercorn's flair for politics was acute. While some in his position expected a continuance of coalition government in the period of reorganization after the war, he realized in his foresight that a separation was almost bound to come and that the prospects of the Labour Party were golden. While its leaders had been fighting the national enemies, its light troops and irregulars had been harrying the only slightly less odious Tories. Its organization was

in full working order, whereas that of its political opponents was moribund. Above all it had contrived to make it appear to the country at large that any favourable or pleasant characteristics of war-time administration were due to the Labour Party and that all the unpleasant side, the queues, the shortages, the lack of personal liberty, must be put to the discredit of the Tories.

Mr. Peppercorn, a just and honourable man, did not altogether approve of these manoeuvres, but even Mr. Peppercorn was not a saint and could not refuse to take advantage of the present state of affairs. Seeking in some new form of activity an anodyne for his grief, he had thrown himself into the work of party organization. With Mr. Shick's aid he had produced and delivered a couple of remarkably statesmanlike speeches in the country. His enemies, as has been hinted, pretended that Mr. Shick wrote all Mr. Peppercorn's speeches, but this was true only up to a point. Mr. Shick wrote all the conventional and perfunctory orations which Cabinet Ministers have to make from time to time and did the donkey work on those which embodied policy. But in the case of the latter Mr. Peppercorn laid down the lines in advance and adorned them with a few deft touches before delivery. You had to be a statesman if you were going to deliver statesmanlike speeches.

The upshot of all this was that for the time being Mr. Peppercorn had largely disinterested himself in the current affairs of the Ministry. This was not such a disaster as might appear. The Ministry was now so smooth-running that it could carry on for a period without the close attention of its parliamentary chief; indeed, if hostilities had stopped that week it could have gone on, so absorbed in its work that it would scarcely have noticed such an event. From Evelyn's personal point of

view, however, it was unfortunate that he felt he could not unburden himself to the Minister just at the moment when he was most in need of advice.

His unrest was only partly allayed by the success of the luncheon party at the Savoy. And yet that was a notable and exciting function, calculated to disabuse the most cynical of any doubt of the importance of the Monobelium Branch. Sir Jeremy Plumpton presided at one end of the table and John Carstairs sat at the other. Evelyn and his second-in-command, Mr. Plimsole, whose only demerit was that he could not stand his oats and assumed airs of overweening condescension, faced each other in the middle. There were six princes of the heavy industries, the editors of three trade papers, the sporting peer who had been at Carstairs Hall and who economized on his rations by eating at least half a dozen official meals per week, Captain Chutney, M.P.—who was not averse to entering the enemy's camp at lunch time—and four of the leaders of the advertising world. (It is, by the way, a gross impropriety to put these great men last on the list and sincerely to be hoped that in their magnanimity and rightful confidence of ascendancy they will not be upset by the slip from the pen of a recorder so humble as the scribe who writes these words.)

Evelyn found himself discussing the future with a publicity magnate on his right, who was of course an optimist like all publicity magnates, and a steel magnate on the other, who was as pessimistic as the British heavy industries have been taught to be. The former opined that there might be temporary troubles after the war but that—given, it need hardly be said, intelligent use of the great trade weapon of publicity—he foresaw a very bright era for industry. The latter spoke of the size of American output and the productive capacity of American

labour, of the loss of our exports and foreign investments. He said that when he thought of the aftermath he shuddered. Then he sighed—and shuddered.

The only blot upon the proceeding was the only speech, which was that of Sir Jeremy Plumpton. Evelyn reflected that for once Thais had made an error—she was not present, since it was a men's party, but had looked closely to the arrangements—in deciding that there should be no speech but that of the Chairman, since Sir Jeremy was thereby given more time than he could otherwise in common decency have taken. However, that was over at last. The advertising magnate, who had understandably fortified himself with brandy while it was in progress—yes, there was very tolerable brandy paid for by the taxpayer, unknown to himself—had become more optimistic than ever and told three stories of the type which used to be known as “smoking-room” and were described by the teller as “slightly rude”, the surest sign that he had enjoyed himself.

The reunion of all these great and disinterested men could scarcely fail to revive the dropping faith and confidence of Evelyn, but it proved to be only a temporary restorative. Soon the slight but definite melancholy which had descended upon him resumed its sway. Thais was puzzled and a little impatient. The hours of business were no longer as happy as they had been. The hours of love continued to be satisfactory, since they were both young, handsome, and ardent of temperament, but that community of interest which had made business and love seem all one was certainly weakened. In desperation Evelyn once again asked her to marry him, but once again she was shocked, declared that she was not that sort of girl, that men were always the same and, in short, awful.

Such was the state of affairs when the allied armies landed in Normandy and the flying bombs began to fall in London and a vague district known as "Southern England". It may readily be imagined that Evelyn was by now in grave perplexity. Until lately the importance of the work in which he was engaged had appeared to him to be beyond questioning. If Thais and Mr. Peppercorn considered it essential to the war and the peace when that came, it was not for him to doubt. He had therefore no hesitation in devoting himself to it. This was total war, and the administrator was as important as the soldier. The senior and indispensable administrator was far more important than the average soldier. It was his manifest duty to remain at the head of his branch.

Once, however, the smallest doubt—unworthy though it seemed to be—about the necessity of the Monobelium Branch to the war effort had touched him, it was inevitable that he should begin to wonder whether he would not be more suitably employed in the struggle round Caen. Not even the enthusiasm of Mr. Mosenthal, who was making his sub-section hum, could banish the reflection. Mr. Peppercorn, a word from whom might have sufficed, seemed far away now, and even Thais had become more remote.

Evelyn should be pitied rather than condemned. To all of us it is now clear that the prospects of victory depended to a large extent upon the Monobelium Branch of the Ministry of Armaments and Supply and kindred organisms such as the Paint Branch of the Ministry of Commerce (in which Captain Hildebrand Arundel had done such fine service before he entered Parliament), the Lead Pencil Branch of the same ministry (which saved the country the vast labour and expense of polishing or

painting pencils), the Fish Board (which organized the delivery of fish from Grimsby to districts as far distant as Cornwall to save transport), the Turkish Sub-section, Section of Foreign Information, of the Ministry of Propaganda (the work of which Evelyn did not even yet appreciate at its true value), the Soft Fruits' Department of the Ministry of Sustenance (which controlled strawberries so thoroughly that they entirely disappeared, as it was desirable they should to fit in with the new austerity), the Paper Board (without which the paper indispensable to the Government offices might actually have been used by commercial publishers), and many more. We have seen the necessity of these bulwarks of efficiency and democracy so fully recognized that they are for the most part being carried on from the war into the peace and some of them are indeed being strengthened rather than weakened. Could proof more positive be required? But Evelyn could not see into the future. He was, moreover, still a simple-minded young man, though he had now attained the age of thirty-one and added, if not a cubit to his stature, some two inches to his waist-line. So Evelyn worried.

CHAPTER XVIII

BLOW THE TRUMPET, DRAW THE SWORD

EVELYN guardedly consulted Major Waterson upon the prospects of getting back to the Army. That sapient warrior remarked that there would be no difficulty at the Army's end of the transaction. The trouble

would be in getting unfrozen, or thawed out, from the Civil Service. The Army was always glad to take anyone it could get, and by now it was by no means overwhelmed by the rush of applicants volunteering for enlistment.

"But, of course," he added, "that depends partly on the sort of army you want to get into. There are two sorts—the sort that does the fighting or administers the army that does the fighting, and the sort that does odd jobs in uniform but might just as well not wear it. That's quite a big army now, but not as easy to get into as the other because there are more candidates."

"I see," said Evelyn. "As a matter of fact I should like to get back into the Border Guards. I started off in them at the beginning of the war, but went sick after a few weeks."

Major Waterson's lips framed a whistle.

"I didn't know," he said, "you were feeling as tired of life as all that."

"It isn't exactly that."

"That's more or less what it comes to. Anyhow, if you can pass the doctor, they'll take you like a shot. But I don't imagine you'll get out of this so easily, unless you can square the Minister—and, um, possibly other people."

Evelyn thought he saw what Major Waterson was driving at and felt somewhat nettled. It was impertinence to suggest that he was tied to the apron strings of Thais, however true that might be. For a moment he contemplated a sharp retort, but then realized that he had put himself into Major Waterson's power. In fact he would have to sue.

"I suppose not," he said, "and, by the way, I think it would be wiser on the whole if you didn't mention

what we've been talking about to—to any member of the staff. Of course, I've no personal objection, but just at the moment it might be a bit unsettling to—to any member of the staff." (Blast the man, what was he grinning at and why hadn't he, Evelyn, taken an outside opinion?)

"Mum's the word!" said Major Waterson. "Discretion's the motto! Silence is golden! Least said, soonest mended! Keep the jolly old trap closed! You can rely on me absolutely," and he laid his fore-finger against his nose.

"Thank you," said Evelyn shortly, and stalked out of the office.

He had decided to take the morning off. One of the flying bombs—now becoming known, in accordance with the strange British habit of giving pet-names to the most loathsome objects, as a doodle-bug—had fallen not far away the previous night. Many windows in the block had been broken, but the only serious damage happened to be in Evelyn's own room, where the larger part of the ceiling had fallen. A party of men had arrived on the scene and were clearing up with that deliberation characteristic of the bomb-repair parties, cool-headed men who never allowed themselves to be flurried. He had recently opened his door suddenly and found them playing solo whist. Had he been a private person his intrusion would have been strongly resented and his remonstrances treated with contempt; but since the bomb-repair men—not as yet having learnt the full extent of their power—were a little afraid of bureaucracy, they deigned to explain, though with injured dignity, that they had removed the débris and were awaiting the plaster. As he left he found the plaster in a heap in the court-yard, but those who were mixing it had

evidently gone away to partake of "elevenses". He concluded that there was no point in his hurrying back.

He took a bus to the top of Bond Street and sauntered down that thoroughfare in the style of a gentleman of leisure of older and easier days. Not that there was much to see in the shop windows, unless the saunterer were particularly interested in silver cups, photographs of Guardsmen, or women's underwear of dubious material and fantastic prices. He had halted to look at some pictures, when a voice beside him said "Hullo!" It was Bridget Livingstone in the uniform of a junior commander in the A.T.S. He had not met her more than a couple of times since that dinner at Claridges in 1941 when Mr. Peppercorn had talked of the role of the commissar, but he had not forgotten her pretty, somewhat haughty face. Had his affections not been so deeply engaged as to render interest in any young woman other than his ladylove out of the question, he might have taken steps to cultivate the acquaintance of Bridget, though she awed him somewhat. He said "Hullo!"

"Foul lot of pictures!" said Bridget. "Bond Street's utterly foul. Everything's getting foul nowadays."

"Yes. How are you?"

"Oh, I'm fine. Matter of fact, not quite so good this morning. Went to a party last night. It was good up to a point but the drinks were foul. There's a lot of hooch about in these places."

"What places?"

"Oh, the places one goes to, you know."

Evelyn, who seldom went to any places, said he knew, and asked her what she was doing. At the moment, she told him, she was having a little leave, but she was working at the War Office in a branch of the Adjutant-General's department which had dealings with the

Ministry of Employment. It was pretty foul, but not fouler than most jobs. She had thought of getting him called up, just for fun.

At that Evelyn's ears pricked. He informed her that he was at a loose end owing to the accident to his ceiling and asked if she could come to luncheon with him. Bridget said thanks ever so and all that, but she was fixed. Mummy had a little party at the Berkeley. But wouldn't he come along? How could he come along, Evelyn asked, when Mummy had her party all fixed up? Oh, that was nothing, Bridget said. Mummy's parties were elastic. She would look in and tell the Berkeley to lay an extra place.

They went in to look at the foul pictures for a few minutes and then strolled on down the street. The sirens sounded and soon afterwards bells rang. They went down into a basement room. A doodle-bug passed directly overhead, with that horrible rattling which suggested that it was at its last gasp and about to drop. They came up again, drawn closer together by the experience and by sharing the sense of shame that they had been immensely relieved when the death in the air passed over them, though well aware—having in fact heard the bang not so far away—that the death had descended upon someone else.

Bridget, her colour coming back with the reaction, looked prettier than ever. Moreover, she had appeared as cool as a cucumber, while two or three other women in the shelter, a foreigner among them especially, had shown signs of distress approaching panic. It has been mentioned in passing that Evelyn entertained some insular prejudices against foreigners in general. These, however, had not hitherto extended to women as much as to men. He had noticed that, whether or not with

the aid of the Black Market, the foreign women in London kept themselves tidier, smarter, and more feminine than the natives. But there could be no doubt that the Englishwomen in general behaved with more dignity under the menace of the rattling death in the air. The two damsels on his own staff who had bolted into the country and sent letters saying they were too ill to work were of recent foreign extraction, and they had been among the smartest and most personable in the office. Evelyn had begun to think there was something to be said for the weary-looking Englishwoman, even when her hands were like a navvy's, her frock seemed to have come from a jumble sale, and the bag clutched under her arm was split and gaping. In any case Bridget was as trim and well dressed as a good tailor could make the rather dull A.T.S. officer's uniform and her "hair do" was excellent, so that with her he had the best of both worlds.

He decided with trepidation to confide to her his desire to return to the Army. Now Bridget was one of those modern young women who express contempt for the emotions. Her attitude to life was cynical. Nothing would have made her admit enthusiasm for patriotic aspirations. But the latest product of super-civilization retains something of the cave-woman in her composition. She cannot resist a thrill, which it would be gross to call a sexual-sensual thrill, at the notion that a good-looking man in a sheltered, dignified, and well-paid post should deliberately seek danger at the cannon's mouth. She said that she might just possibly be able to help.

They called in at the Berkeley to ask for another place to be set at Mrs. Livingstone's table, and then went and sat in the dirty Green Park among the American soldiers and their girls. Bridget looked a degree less

haughty, though she was far from talkative and certainly far below Thais as a conversationalist. Yet she and Evelyn got on well without talking much.

When they arrived in the Berkeley for luncheon Mrs. Livingstone seemed quite glad to see Evelyn, but he found himself in some doubt as to whether she remembered who he was. Bridget, in the modern manner, murmured "this is Evelyn" and "this is Phyllis"—or Frankie or Irene or Arthur—after which introductions he had no more notion of the identity of those he had met than they had of his. The modern manner has something to be said for it because in many cases it does not particularly matter that one should be able to identify the persons with whom one is invited to share a meal.

But there was one man present whose identity Evelyn did discover and to his great interest, Major Upton-Snagge, Under-Secretary of State for War, who was a cousin of Mrs. Livingstone's. Bridget had not known that he was going to be present—she never did know who would turn up at her mother's parties and did not bother to find out—but she did not miss the opportunity. Evelyn saw her go and speak to her mother, then whisper earnestly to Major Upton-Snagge, while they were drinking what went by the name of a cocktail in 1944. And at the table he found himself seated next to the Under-Secretary.

It so happened that Major Upton-Snagge had served in the Border Guards, so that he naturally considered Evelyn's desire to return to that famous regiment to be a mark of merit and deserving of support, almost as a compliment to himself. He even proposed to take Evelyn back to the War Office after luncheon and see what he could do about it. The recipient of this unusual

honour thanked him warmly, but it was to Bridget, on his other side at the table, that his gratitude went out in a warm glow. He thanked her in even stronger terms, terms so strong, indeed, that they brought the faintest of flushes to her cheeks—a thing, she reflected with astonishment, that she had not experienced for a long time. She told herself that she could not be quite as “hard-boiled” as she had imagined.

“That’s absolutely all right and all that,” she said. “It’ll be wizard if you bring it off, and then you must get a commission and grow one of those nice moustaches.”

Evelyn thought he would remain clean-shaven even as a Guardsman. He was still somewhat scared of Bridget, who was so much more experienced in the ways of the world and so much more decisive than he was himself. He hesitated to suggest that they should meet again so that he could report upon how he had got on, but she obligingly helped him out.

“Ring me up afterwards if you don’t forget all about it. Why not dine together and tell me all about it? Matter of fact, I was dining with some people, now I think of it, but they’re really rather foul types. Shall I put them off?”

Evelyn stammered that if she would rather dine with him he would be delighted. But Bridget was not prepared to go as far as that. It was against her principles. She would only say she would “just as soon”, but even that seemed a high honour to Evelyn. So it was arranged. Mrs. Livingstone, who had taken in the conversation without appearing to, was studying her daughter with some surprise. Evelyn did not belong to the sacred circle whose members were known to all who mattered—that is, to the circle itself—by their Christian names; but at least he was preferable to Don Juan Mendoza,

whose Latin-American blood was plentifully mixed with negro, Indian, and goodness knew what besides, with whom Bridget had lately been dancing and who was in fact one of the foul types she was to have dined with that night. In any case it would probably not go very far; Bridget was inclined to tire of "types" at an early stage.

At the War Office Major Upton-Snagge played about with buzzers and red, green, and black telephones, shouted "Get me this!" and "Get me that!" in best commissar style, and in an incredibly short time, judged by the standard of everybody except a commissar dealing with the telephone system in time of war, informed Evelyn that he could become a Border Guardsman to-morrow if the Ministry of Armaments and Supply would liberate him. ("Liberate" was a favourite word just now; Caen had just been "liberated" by being laid flat.)

"This is going to be the difficult part," he said. "The Minister's away, isn't he? Yes, I thought so. Peppercorn hasn't been the same man since he lost his wife, though—Anyhow," went on Major Upton-Snagge, without finishing that sentence, "Skinner can give me an answer. I'll tackle him." Then he shouted: "Get me Mr. Skinner, Ministry of Armaments and Supply, and get him quick!"

Mr. Septimus Skinner, M.P., has not yet been introduced, or required to be, to the readers of this economical narrative. The Parliamentary Under-Secretary was not a striking figure, and in the House of Commons rarely opened his mouth, his chief having a mouth big enough for two. He looked with scorn upon the Monobelium Branch and with positive dislike upon Evelyn as its head, perhaps because he thought it largely redundant but more probably because his particular function was co-

ordination and he had found it impossible to co-ordinate this favourite child of the Minister's.

Evelyn realized that Mr. Skinner did not love him or his branch, and his spirits sank when he heard Major Upton-Snagge demand that he should be got. Had he possessed more imagination, Evelyn might have guessed that the absence of the patron who would have clung to him was all to his advantage now that he sought to be liberated.

Mr. Skinner could hardly believe his ears when he heard Major Upton-Snagge's request over the telephone. He thought that Evelyn must be either drunk or deranged. But the opportunity was too good to be lost. His department drew up the annual list of vitally essential men who might not be unfrozen, who might not come out of the ministerial refrigerator under any consideration. He had never entered Evelyn's name on the list; thus he considered he could say with truth that Evelyn was not indispensable to the Ministry. There did cross his mind the reflection that when the old lion returned to his cave from his wanderings, he might cut up rough over the loss of his cub, and Mr. Peppercorn, when he cut up rough, was a formidable lion with a very loud roar. However, he decided that if Mr. Peppercorn proved angry he would play the idiot boy and plead the letter of the regulations. His eyes shining with delighted malice, he replied to Major Upton-Snagge that Mr. Allardyce was not registered in the highest category of reservation; that the branch of which he was the chief had reached its maximum development and might perhaps carry on under a less experienced administrator; that much as he would regret the departure of Mr. Allardyce on personal as well as public grounds—here his eyes nearly popped out of his head with pleasur-

able expectation, but he kept his voice quiet and even—he did not feel he could stand in his way. Nor did he consider that there need be long delay. He would put the appropriate machinery into action at once.

Evelyn was astounded by the speed with which his case had gone through. In fact, he began to wonder whether he had not been just a little precipitate. Someone had remarked at luncheon that the Guards got all the heaviest and ugliest jobs to do, and he had a vision of himself as a special target for the machine-gun fire of platoon after platoon of Germans, while he staggered forward, light-headed and “bomb-happy”, towards an unattainable objective. And then there was Thais to be faced. That interview would certainly not go with a swing. Many ardent young men are eager in time of war to put themselves into a situation which is likely to involve rapid death, but few can resist at least a momentary feeling that they are excessively patriotic once they have got themselves there. In Evelyn’s case his ardour had been blunted by his peaceful avocations for the last four years and the assurance which is so universal in the ranks of the commissars that their rôle is more important than that of the mere soldiery.

He was consoled and fortified by his dinner with Bridget that night. A stranger might not have called her gracious, but to Evelyn, who knew how excessively ungracious she could be, and often was, she appeared seraphic in her charm and amiability. He could not help feeling, vilely traitorous though it was to allow such a sentiment to pervade his mind, that had he been drawn into Bridget’s orbit instead of that of Thais he might not have become so great a figure, but on the other hand he would not have been so persistently driven to perform feats in which he found but temporary satis-

faction and the significance of which he did not completely understand. The steeplechaser that has been ridden in one hard race after another, always driven forward by steady pressure and shown the whip on great occasions, may experience excitement and the thrill of emulation on the race-course, but he will relish the day when he descends to a quieter life, with a light-handed rider taking him for canters on the thymy downs.

Hard Bridget might be, but she was too easy-going to use the whip and she was not consumed by ambition. And somehow to-night, in the soft light of the half-empty restaurant—half-empty because the death in the air kept people at home or sent them to the country—she did not look hard. She smiled at him without speaking when their eyes met. Evelyn wondered what she was thinking. If her thoughts had been put into words they would have run somewhat like this: "I always thought him a fool, and perhaps he is, but if so what a nice fool! Or is he really such a fool? Or am I? Oh hell, I don't know what's happening to me!"

CHAPTER XIX

A VISION OF THE FUTURE

EVELYN'S day had been spent in the strictest sobriety, but as he entered the office on the morrow he felt like a drunkard returning from a debauch with the prospect of having to do penance to his spouse. And this prospect was all the more intimidating because of late there had been a very slight obstacle, the slightest

of barriers, between him and Thais, something impalpable and so fragile that it seemed to both easy to blow away with a breath, and yet there it stayed. Besides, apart from the question of his return to the Army, he was feeling a little guilty about last night's dinner. It is easy to strain a loyalty, especially when the face is pretty, but it is difficult to avoid recalling having done so.

It is not proposed to discuss in detail the interview in which Evelyn confessed that he had arranged to go back to the Army, which was, it need hardly be said, the only confession he made. He was a simple young man, but not simple enough to go further than that. Even that was bad enough. Thais was not angry, and perhaps matters would have been easier if she had been. She was shocked and bewildered. Her persistent, "But why, why?" was the *leit-motiv* to all her protestations. She could not understand it all. He was abandoning the great machine just as they had built it up together to something near perfection. How could she ever hold it together by herself? She would not have the heart. Who was to retain the Minister's good graces? Who was to manage Mr. Mosenthal? Who was to keep Major Waterson from selling things or petting the typists?

She was deaf to Evelyn's argument that she had done all these things and could go on doing them. She had in a flash, now that she was losing Evelyn, invested him in her own eyes with all the legendary qualities which she had created for the rest of the world. He was the hustler, the strong, ruthless business man; she was the weak woman doing his bidding to the best of her poor ability. She even went so far as to say that his action amounted to desertion, to betrayal of the country. Enlist-

ment in such circumstances was nothing to be honoured, because a higher duty called; it was, on the contrary, perilously near to selfishness and vanity. She admitted that things were going well, but this was not the time to relax. And she glanced up meaningly at the poster on the wall which bore the device, "You went to it—now stick at it. Samuel Peppercorn", the Minister's latest slogan, in the red and blue capitals which this week adorned the hoardings up and down the country.

Evelyn did not defend himself, unless a repetition of the words, "I just felt I must," can be called a defence. What he dreaded above all was that she should suddenly exclaim: "It's because you don't love me!" But she was too proud for that. They avoided personal matters, though each of them realized how closely these were bound up with the business in hand. What man or woman cares to be the first to admit the weakening of love? All, except those of rough and brutal temperament, try to maintain to the last the pretence that nothing is changed. Evelyn and Thais did so now, but when they parted that evening it was on leaden feet. Somehow or another both knew, and each knew that the other knew, things would never be the same again.

A week later Evelyn was gone. They kissed fervently, but they made no arrangements to meet when he got his first leave—that, Evelyn suggested, could be arranged on the telephone nearer to the time. Every woman should realize that when her lover proposes to fix their next meeting on the telephone it is high time to look for another. Ardent lovers fix meetings then and there and leave the telephone to deal with accidents. Thais went back to work with, for the first time in her career, a certain difficulty in summoning resolution to jump into the collar. Worse still, until the great Mr. Peppercorn,

now keeping his tent like Achilles, should return to the lists, it was impossible to obtain a decision as to who was to succeed Evelyn at the head of the branch. She supposed it would be the present nominal second-in-command, Mr. Plimsole, whom she thought a pompous little frog, inflated almost to bursting. Under cover of Evelyn's authority she had disregarded him, so that all he had got out of his position was the pleasure of looking grand and throwing his weight about, but it would be a very different matter now that that authority was removed. Would Mr. Plimsole take it out of her?

Bah! What did it matter if he did? She was too tired and dejected even to feel anxiety. All was weary, flat, stale, and unprofitable. She was sitting at her desk in this mood one morning when she was handed a note summoning her to see the Minister that afternoon at 3 p.m. So Mr. Peppercorn was back. How was he taking things? Had he interviewed Mr. Septimus Skinner and if so how had the Under-Secretary carried off his explanation of Evelyn's liberation? She fancied that sparks must have flown and hoped they had, feeling no good will towards Mr. Skinner.

When she went round that afternoon the private secretary told her that the Minister was alone and that she had better go straight in. She went in, and had closed the door behind her before she realized that Mr. Peppercorn was lying forward in his chair, his face hidden in the crook of his arm, which lay on the desk. She stood still, stupefied. Was this mourning for the loss of Evelyn? Then she decided that she had better escape quietly and leave him to his grief, since it seemed that he had not heard her enter. But just then the siren sounded, and he looked up. His face was haggard. He was obviously under the influence of deep distress. He stared at her

as though he scarcely knew her. Then she just caught the words, wrung from him, it seemed, in agony:

"Ramsbotham! Ramsbotham!"

"What is it, sir? Can I do anything for you? Would you like me to come back again a little later on?"

"No, young Thais. Sit down. I sent for you to talk about this business about young Evelyn. Confounded business. I dam' near killed Skinner when I heard about it this morning. But something else has happened since and nearly driven it out of my mind. We'll have to go into it some other time. I can't think of anything but this other thing."

"What is the other thing?"

"It's Ramsbotham, my dear old friend Ramsbotham," said Mr. Peppercorn, his usually amiable expression becoming almost satanic, as so often happened when he spoke of his dear old friend.

"What has he done now?"

"It's a long story. Dear old Ramsbotham!"

Long or short, Mr. Peppercorn seemed incapable of telling it. He groaned. He lit a cigar. He washed his hands vigorously, doubtless of Mr. Ramsbotham and all his works; but this brought him no comfort. And to Thais the dreadful feature of it all was that his eloquence had deserted him. It must be a serious shock which had robbed Mr. Peppercorn of his power of expression.

The kind heart of Thais warmed to him. She felt sure that sharing the burden would help him. Besides, she was very curious. She therefore asked one or two tactful questions to encourage him to talk. He became less agitated. He patted her hand in gratitude. Then at last, leaning back in his chair, now relatively calm but still overcome by melancholy, filling the air with the delightful smoke of his Cabañas, he told the long story.

It appeared that during the period when grief for the loss of Mrs. Peppercorn had caused him to absent himself largely from the Ministry and the search for consolation had thrown him into the study of political problems, Mr. Peppercorn had come to two important conclusions, of which at this period the world at large had not the slightest inkling. The first was that the links which bound the all-party government together were suffering from strain and would almost inevitably snap at the end of the war with Germany. The second was that, in the general election which must follow the break-up, the prospects of Mr. Peppercorn's party were golden. These conclusions had led him to give considerable thought to his future—of course, as is always the case with politicians, wholly from the point of view of the nation's welfare.

He recognized that nowhere in the ranks of Labour was there anyone so well qualified as himself for the office of Prime Minister, but he knew that Theodore Gabby was virtually a certainty for that and could think of no form of sabotage consistent with his high sense of honour and—still more important—not easily to be detected which would eliminate his candidature. Mr. Peppercorn therefore modestly decided that he could not be Prime Minister—at least not yet, though, since he was nearly ten years the junior of Mr. Gabby, now turned sixty, a far better speaker, and much better looking, he would not altogether abandon hope. How then could Mr. Peppercorn best serve his country when the change came?

At first, he confided to Thais, he had toyed with the idea of presiding over a grandiose Ministry of Reconstruction which would co-ordinate all such measures to rebuild a peace-time economy as could be taken before the defeat of Japan. "Reconstruction" was a heartening

word, and "co-ordination" had a charming ring. Mr. Peppercorn was, however, a highly experienced politician with a thick vein of caution. He sensed that in the matter of reconstruction people would look for quick results, and he was distrustful of the possibility of quick results, in fact, of any results at all for a long time to come. His present office had made him somewhat pessimistic in that respect, and, besides, his temperament inclined to the abstract or theoretical approach to political problems. He liked, as he said, to deal with them "on broad lines". Here Thais ventured to say that she cordially agreed with him. She considered the principle of judgment by results most pernicious in public affairs.

Mr. Peppercorn went on to say that he had finally decided to be Secretary of State for External Relations. There and there alone could scope be found for his knowledge of affairs, his eloquence, and his experience. It was a magnificent vista. He had even gone so far as to foresee some of the headlines in his obituary notice. "Labour's Castlereagh" was one of the most striking of them. Never had he felt more inspired. And then—and then—at luncheon with Mr. Theodore Gabby at the Virginia Creeper to-day he had been informed that his dear old friend Ramsbotham had firmly staked his claim to the post. At mention of that name Mr. Peppercorn's composure deserted him again. He hurled his cigar out of the window with a savage gesture. He clawed at his throat. He ejaculated once more: "Ramsbotham! Ramsbotham!" It was terrible to see a great and strong man so deeply distressed. A silence fell between them after he had told the moving story to the end. Thais ventured to break it at last.

"Mr. Peppercorn," she said very softly.

"Yes. I suppose you'll say he'll make a mess of it

But the Russians and the Americans and the Chinese can't vanish like the onions and strawberries when he controlled 'em. The Poles can't go bad like his fish. And the Balkan people won't queue up like his housewives."

"May I make a suggestion? It's just something you might care to work out. It would take a real brain to do that, and I don't pretend to have one. But you can supply the brain, and I've a feeling the idea might be terrific."

"Go ahead, my girl," said Mr. Peppercorn, his misery relieved by a faint spark of interest.

"I thought you might have a new office, Minister of Planning and Controls?"

"Eh? What's that? Controls? But they'll be coming off. A Ministry that's cutting its own throat wouldn't be much of a job. Think again, young Thais." And Mr. Peppercorn washed his hands of controls.

"My idea," said Thais, "is to have a super-Ministry"—here Mr. Peppercorn nodded vigorously; he liked things on a large scale—"which might have a Ministry of Reconstruction under it, but wouldn't have to do the common or garden work of reconstruction itself. It would be the top planner for the Government and the whole nation."

"Damme, that sounds all right to me," said Mr. Peppercorn, obviously interested.

"And—anyhow this is my idea, for you to do what you like with—as the top planner it would have to have in its hands all the controls, because large-scale national planning can't function without controls."

"I suppose not, now you come to think of it."

"I'm certain of it. Now take travel, for instance. If you're planning, you've got to send people all over the

place. But directly the war in Europe's over you'll have bishops and bagmen and all sorts of people positively screaming for seats in aeroplanes and cabins in boats and sleepers in trains. If you don't look out you'll have the planners crowded out. You've simply got to keep the V.I.P. system going."

"Yes, and I shan't have much use for life when I stop being a V.I.P."

"I intend to be one too, after the war."

"Oh, you do, do yer. Bully for you, young Thais! Getting ambitious, aren't you?"

"Just a bit. I was quite glad to work in the background before, but now things have changed, and——"

Mr. Peppercorn nodded sympathetically. He was not unobservant.

"And—and I've thought of some good slogans. What about: 'Free enterprise means war. Planned economy means peace'?"

Mr. Peppercorn wrote it down in a note-book, kept for the purpose.

"We'll have to see how the wind blows before we launch that one, but it sounds all right. Any more?"

"It's your Government. Let it look after you and the kids."

"H'm, yes, not bad."

"A long pull and a strong pull and a pull all together.' How about that?"

"Might do. The other side might say it was what the hangman said to the man he was hanging," said Mr. Peppercorn with a grin, noting down both the phrase and the retort, the latter just in case it fell to him to sit in opposition after all.

"Nationalize all that should belong to the nation.' Oh, I forgot to say, the Ministry of Planning and Controls

would of course have charge of all nationalization schemes: banks, coal, railways, and even the land, if you felt like nationalizing that. And all state trading too."

"It'd be a biggish thing," said Mr. Peppercorn, rubbing his chin.

"Well, I said a super-Ministry, and I meant it. I thought you might begin by taking over the whole of Bush House."

"That'd certainly be a good building, for a start at all events. Of course there's always more prestige in Whitehall, but still— Yes, damme, Bush House would be respectable accommodation."

"My idea is this," went on Thais. "Some of the ministries will be cutting down a bit after the war—they'll have to, if it's only for the look of the thing—but whoever's in charge of nationalization will have to build up entirely new staffs, so he'll be expanding while others are contracting. I feel sure every industry that's nationalized will have to have its special government branch, and some of them very big ones."

"H'm, wouldn't do to tell the public that."

"Then don't tell it. Another idea I had was that the post-war government should cling on like death to the war-time principle that everything the people get is a 'privilege' or a 'concession'. If you get the country to think on those lines it will be quite docile, and when it shows signs of restiveness you can give it another small concession. But once people begin talking of 'rights' you never know what may happen. It would be most dangerous—for you!" she added through her teeth, but Mr. Peppercorn was too fully in agreement with her words to notice any irony, if irony there were.

"You've heard my theory of the British commissar?" asked Mr. Peppercorn.

Thais winced and said hastily that she had, in dread that she was to hear it again.

"Well, if what you say's true—and, damme, I believe it is—the aftermath period is going to be a testing time for them. If we want to keep 'em we've got to look after 'em."

"Making the world safe for commissars. I'm afraid that wouldn't do for one of our slogans." But again Mr. Peppercorn took no heed.

"We mustn't allow this great instrument we've created to become dulled," said Mr. Peppercorn, with something like a boom in his voice, as though he were addressing an audience beyond Thais. "In my view this great instrument is an expression and an organ of public spirit. No, perhaps 'organ of public spirit' is not the best phrase," he added below his breath, "but we'll improve upon it, we'll improve upon it. Bureaucracy may not be a popular word—I'm prepared to admit that it's not a popular word—but there's no better word at the moment, unless I can find one, to define those public services in this country which, I venture to say, in their integrity and in their assiduity, in their energy and in their vigour, are the admiration and the envy of the civilized world."

Thais sat back with an expression of placid interest, as though she were on the platform beside the speaker of the day, and Mr. Peppercorn went on, but this time in a different, a more confidential manner. He was no longer on the public platform but addressing the private meeting of the caucus.

"We've got to protect 'em and see that they're not robbed of the little privileges they need if they're to function properly. No flaunting, nothing of that sort, but reasonable power, protection from merely mischievous interrogations and criticism, and a few privileges."

"That's only fair. Even the lowest order of commissar ought for instance to have his coal-box well filled, even if those outside the circle are a bit chilly. Then there's accommodation. We put them into the safest blocks of flats, whoever we turned out. We mustn't be in too much of a hurry to turn them out even if there's a lot of squealing."

"What I feel is that it's a great pity there's such a strong prejudice against the poor chaps. I'd like to make 'em more popular."

"Afraid it can't be done."

"I wonder. The old governing classes were popular in their way. Now I'll tell you something. My family has always been politically minded. My father stood for Hickleton, where we were living when I was a nipper. He was a Liberal-Labour candidate, what they called a 'Lib.-Lab.' He was popular and worked like a black in the constituency, and the Conservative Member wasn't up to much. So my dad thought he was certain to win the seat. Well, just before the General Election the Member died. He was a retired hardware dealer. The Conservatives chose a young chap about twenty-five, the eldest son of an earl, with a pretty wife who was the daughter of a duke, and a four-in-hand of spanking horses to drive round the constituency in. Well, believe it or not, between the title and the wife and the four-in-hand, they beat my poor old dad easily. Now what I always feel is that we ought to be able to create something of the same sort of enthusiasm for the new ruling classes as there was for the old."

"A big job," said Thais, "because there's no glamour about them."

"Don't I know it! But glamour can be worked up. Did you ever see anyone with less glamour than Ramsbotham? And yet look at the fuss they make about him."

"Well, we might do something. I think all that sort of thing should come under the Ministry of Planning and Controls. Make them popular if you can. But the first consideration is to see that the Minister's popular."

"Ah, there I quite agree. That's most important for the sake of the country. As an individual I don't care two straws for it," said Mr. Peppercorn, vigorously washing his hands of popularity, "but for the public good I have to go after it. And it might be a good thing to get as many as possible of the junior order of commissars on to the band-wagon. Careful propaganda on the one side and provision of a few more amenities to broaden their minds."

"I quite agree. Even quite small amenities count. How would it be to reserve sixty per cent of the tables at the Virginia Creeper permanently for the commissars?"

This time Mr. Peppercorn saw the joke and grinned.

"They must have nearly that now," he said. "No, my dear, I don't think we'll work it that way. To tell you the truth, I find 'em rather dull dogs in the mass. As you say, they lack glamour. They look a bit depressing and don't wash their hair often enough. We might have classes in charm, and raise the standard. But, as things are, I confess that on the rare occasions when I go to the Creeper I like to see a bit of variety, a bit of the outside world. What do you think?"

"I think I agree, but I've seen so little of it," said Thais demurely.

"We must do what we can to alter that. Eh?"

Thais said that she would not mind seeing more of the Creeper. There was a pause, during which Mr. Peppercorn patted her hand again, but this time allowed his own to rest upon it for quite an appreciable time.

"You're a good girl, young Thais," he said at length. "You've given me some good ideas. We'll have to work

'em out a bit more. And you've made me feel a bit more hopeful. I think," he went on diffidently—strange mood for Mr. Peppercorn—"that in private, on occasions of the strictest privacy, you might call me Sam."

"Oh, Mr.—Sam!"

"But not Soapy."

"S-S-Sam, you're terrific!"

While this conversation was in progress Evelyn was sitting on a small hummock in a large pit which formed a natural arena. There were other soldiers sitting about in groups, but none near him. It seemed that he was avoided. He was the only recruit to the Border Guards who had ever worn the ribbon of the C.B.E., and that was a barrier between him and his fellow-soldiers. Moreover, his fame had spread. He was a commissar fallen and come down to the ranks of common soldiers. The recruits did not mean to be unkind in thus shunning his society. They were almost as scared of him as though he had been a leper. So he sat alone.

His back and loins ached. His fair hair was dark with sweat, and runnels of sweat had made channels through the dust on his face. The skin on his nose was peeling. It is true that his chest had expanded an inch and his waist contracted about the same amount, but that gave him no pleasure. He did not at the moment care twopence about his chest or his waist. He longed only for rest and comfort. There were, he reflected, fools and damned fools, and there was himself.

He did not see a gigantic figure appear on the edge of the pit, with a chest that made a mockery of his own, eyes whose gaze curdled the blood, a moustache with hairs that bristled like quills upon the fretful porpentine, the presence of an irascible demi-god. This terrible personage

contemplated the figures below him for a moment, then filled his lungs with air till his battle-dress, though famed as the biggest in the Army, almost burst under the strain.

"Hi-de-hi!" yelled the sergeant-major, splitting the very firmament.

And, as he staggered to his feet, from his parched and contracted throat Evelyn croaked: "Ho-de-ho!"

CHAPTER XX

PEACE HATH HER VICTORIES

VICTORY over Germany has been achieved, and people are already wondering how soon we shall start helping the Germans to build up what we have knocked down and how long this will take. VE Day has brought the natural accompaniments of peace: longer queues, further cuts in the rations, more commissars. Yet, to be just, there are changes even more agreeable to the general public. There is a basic petrol ration. "How did you get here, darling?" asks Lady Agatha, encountering Lady Jennifer in the paddock at Ascot. "On my basic, darling. Wonderful, isn't it?"

And, see, in the afternoon sunlight on the Bayswater Road, there is a sight which tells us better than any announcement over the radio, better than a talk by Mr. Peppercorn—and his was the hell of a talk—that some of the conditions of peace are returning already. It is a sight not seen since 1939. Strong men feel nostalgic tears welling up in their eyes as they look upon it. Up towards the Marble Arch drives Mr. Benny Rosencrantz

in his 20-horse Slinker, a delightfully rakish car specially designed to look as like a 40-horse Grantley as possible. Mr. Rosencrantz has at last been enabled to tear himself away from the essential war work which has kept him in Keswick—where he has been an exemplary air raid warden—for the past five years. The Slinker has been laid up and is in good shape.

And beside Mr. Rosencrantz sits Miss Dawn Guildenstern. What Miss Guildenstern has been doing just lately is not known; her movements have not been traced since she had that unfortunate breakdown in health which forced her to abandon her work in the Monobelium Branch of the Ministry of Armaments and Supply and depart to the country just at the time of the doodle-bug raids last summer. Miss Guildenstern takes a dim view of the country and is glad to be back. But the astonishing thing is that Miss Guildenstern is fiddling with her Edwardian *coiffure* just as she always did when she passed us in a car in 1939. We have never seen Miss Guildenstern passing in a car when she was not engaged in hair-dressing, except once, when she was engaged in the equally interesting task of making up her face. It must be tiring to have to keep on tiring all the time, but Miss Guildenstern seems happy. As for Benny, he is in the seventh heaven. How often has he not exclaimed in anguish to his companions in the wardens' post at Keswick: "This war deprives a chap of all that makes life worth living! A lovely car an' a lovely girl! That's what I call true happiness. When shall I see 'em again?" Now he is back to all that makes life worth living, and has besides a nice little job buying watches and cameras from American soldiers for his cousin's firm, one of the best and most respected in the Black Market.

The Monobelium Branch has gone badly in the past

twelve-month. It almost seems that the enconiums lavished upon Evelyn by Mr. Shick and Mr. Mosenthal must be accepted as true in substance and in fact—odd as such a statement about the announcements of public relations officers may appear—because since he left the Branch has never looked forward. There has been only a single scandal, but that was a major one. Major Water-son, after petting half a dozen of the typists, succumbed to his old weakness. Having indulged in a blind which has become historic, he sold his desk and velvet-cushioned swivel chair to a second-hand furniture dealer and was thereby enabled to prolong the blind for two days longer than would otherwise have been possible. That business nearly broke the heart of Thais. It contributed to the slackening of discipline, which had already begun. Thais, generally the kindest and most considerate of task-masters, found her temper sadly strained, and she, who had in the old days seldom needed to administer a reproof, now often invaded a room where coffee-housing was in progress, with a fierce: "Less nattering, and get on with it!"

And the incident did not stand alone, though none of the other troubles were as distressing or as blatant. The whole thing has been at sixes and sevens. Mr. Plimsole has proved a grievous disappointment. He looks the part, has in fact a genuine commissar-like presence, but he has contrived to make himself detested by his subordinates, despised by his superiors, and regarded with suspicion by the world of industry. The result has been disastrous. First of all, firms in possession of small surpluses took to passing them on without consulting the Ministry because they could not stand Mr. Plimsole's rudeness. From that dealings spread all over the place without the Ministry's knowledge, and there developed what you might call a Black Market in monobelium.

Some of the foreigners or semi-foreigners engaged after the great expansion were found to be implicated in this, and there was nothing for it but to dismiss them and transfer them to Unrra. There again was evidence of Evelyn's genius and perspicacity. He had laid it down as a general principle that foreigners were pernicious, and he had been right. There is no doubt that the grand old spirit has departed from the Monobelium Branch.

Meanwhile the Government has gone out and another has come in. Mr. Peppercorn and Mr. Septimus Skinner have departed, and their successors have taken over. Mr. Peppercorn is genuinely mourned, but nearly everybody has been glad to see the back of Mr. Skinner. Mr. Peppercorn's successor is none other than Captain Chutney.

On the morning of 29 May, 1945, Thais was sent for by the new Minister. She made her way to the familiar room murmuring appropriate tags: "What a falling-off was there!" "And to decline Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor to those of mine." "Hyperion to a satyr." "O, horrible! O, horrible! most horrible!" But Captain Chutney, if one could only have got over the outrage of his sitting in that honoured chair, looked almost pleasant and more amiable than usual.

"Sit down, Miss MacNutt," he said. "It may be a bit irregular on my part to say what I'm going to. I've seen Mr. Plimsole"—his aristocratic nostrils twitched slightly with disgust, and if he had been Mr. Peppercorn he would assuredly at this stage have washed his hands of Mr. Plimsole—"and I've talked to Sir Jeremy Plumpton. I understand from Sir Jeremy that you have a special knowledge of the affairs of the Branch from the very beginning, whereas Mr. Plimsole is by comparison a recent importation."

Thais answered that that was so.

"Then you should be able to give me more information than I've found it possible to get from Mr. Plimsole. Now, first of all, when this branch was formed, what was its object?"

"Simply to have a liaison here with Carstairs and Sons."

"And can you say what effect it has had on the production of monobelium?"

"Well, very little."

"Has it had any effect at all?"

"No, I don't think it has. I don't see how it could."

"Then about distribution. Did it have an effect on that?"

"It affected a percentage of the output, which was allotted more fairly in relation to needs than before."

"What percentage?"

"That's hard to say. To be strictly honest I should put it at about five per cent."

"And how big was the staff here when it first favourably affected five per cent of the amount distributed?"

"Oh, about four or five," said Thais, wriggling her shoulders despite herself.

"Then the remainder of the activities of the Branch was concerned with information—collection of information and distribution to government departments and the public?"

"Yes."

"What would be the result if that were to stop? Would much harm be done?"

"It depends on what you mean by harm. ("I mean harm, as a rule," interjected Captain Chutney.) It would do away with a great deal of information and statistical material which was considered necessary for the

running of the war and which the late Minister thought would be useful for the peace."

"I see. Well, I intend to close it down."

"All the information side?"

"No, the whole boiling. I don't think anyone in the country will notice the difference."

Thais caught her breath. The work of four solid years was to be undone by this jack-in-office. It was cruel. But she would not flinch. She would not give Captain Chutney the satisfaction of seeing that she was distressed.

"I understand," she said quietly. "How soon is it to be done?"

"Just as quickly as you can manage it."

"As I can manage it?"

"Yes, I want you to wind it up. Mr. Plimsole can be put at the disposal of the Central Employment Board from to-morrow, and you will attend to the obsequies."

"Very good, sir."

"Take a few days over it. Arrange with the Ministry of Employment about the staff, and put the documents in the archives."

"Very good, sir, and then?"

"Oh, I propose that you shall remain, with the same status as before, as the channel of communications with Carstairs and Son. You can keep a secretary."

"Very good, sir. Anything more?"

"No, I think that's all, thank you."

Thais went out to set about her task of wrecking her own work with quiet determination and a stiff upper lip. Perhaps, she reflected, it was a pity Mr. Peppercorn had scored off Captain Chutney in reply to questions in the House quite so often. It might have been wiser to let Captain Chutney take some wickets. But it was no good repining. They had had their innings, and it had been

a good one. They had made a lot of runs. And there might be a second innings. Revenge might yet be possible. And in fact, before her melancholy task was complete, within the next ten days, Thais enjoyed a foretaste of revenge in listening to Mr. Peppercorn's election broadcast. In that great oration, by far the most brilliant exposition of the party's policy in the series, Mr. Peppercorn took the winding-up of the Monobelium Branch as his text and as an example of the Tory policy of abandoning controls in the interests of private exploitation of the country. He gave Captain Chutney's coat a thorough dusting. Captain Chutney smiled sourly and sent a message to Thais that he desired the liquidation to be expedited.

So the fell deed (*vide* Mr. Peppercorn's broadcast) was accomplished. History affords few parallels of such an enormity carried out in pure party malice, such a wreckage of the highest and finest work of the planner and the commissar through guile and selfishness. O Liberty, what things are done in thy name! With deep shame we must thus record the end of what has been the central subject of this narrative, extinction of a great undertaking and the undoing of great work.

But what gave rise to no little surprise,
Nobody seem'd one penny the worse.

John Carstairs went so far as to say that there was a considerable improvement because there was no one now to waste his time, but, as has already been hinted, he was prejudiced and reactionary. The opportunity was taken to get rid of a couple of obnoxious members of the staff, while the rest found new niches. In fact, as the Establishment Officer said to Thais, it was lucky the Branch had been dissolved, since he could not otherwise have met the

new demands which were showering in upon him. Mr. Mosenthal set up a record by departing voluntarily. He had got a good job on Mr. Shick's old evening paper.

One warm summer morning, at the time when the election campaign was at its height, a man, young but a veteran who had suffered in his country's wars, and a young woman might have been observed—were observed, in fact—walking down Bond Street. The man supported himself on a crutch. His left foot was in a heavily-padded slipper. His head was elaborately bandaged under his black-peaked cap. They stopped at a picture dealer's shop and looked in the window.

"This," said the young man softly, "is the window we met in front of last year."

"Yes," said the young woman, "and they've got just as foul a lot of pictures as they had then."

"Bridget, you're an iconoclast."

"What's that? Sounds pretty foul to me."

"It means something cynical. I was feeling a bit sentimental about that window."

"Senti—— Oh, my God, Evelyn, you're not coming all over queer, are you? You haven't been overdoing it, have you? Shall we see if we can get a drink somewhere?"

"No, I'm quite all right. But it is a wonderful feeling that I've got through all that and—and got back again."

"Perfectly wizard."

"And got back to you."

"Don't mention it. Sweetie-pie, are you *sure* you don't want a drink?"

"No, precious, I don't. And are you really going to marry me?"

"Well, angel, I said so, didn't I? It seems to be the

fashion. And Mummy and Daddy seem quite pleased. I believe they thought I might marry an undesirable."

"You know I've got a ghastly lump out of my head and I don't believe the hair will ever grow on it."

"I can put up with it."

"Bridget, precious, this is wonderful."

"Absolutely wizard."

"Shall we announce our engagement?"

"May as well soon. It's the usual thing to do. Golly, here's your cousin, Lady Eva."

"Oh, darling Evelyn!" cried Lady Eva. "I was thinking such a lot about you. Are you out of hospital? Oh, that's lovely. If your mamma can spare you, you must come and stay with us in the country."

"I'd love to, Cousin Eva. But I was just going to tell you that Bridget and I—I mean to say, we're——"

"Not really? Oh, how grand! Bridget, I *am* delighted!"

"Well, I'm rather delighted myself," said Bridget, with unusual enthusiasm.

"And you must get leave and come too."

"I'll try. That would be lovely. There's a horrible old what-not who always makes a fuss about giving me leave, but I'll try hard."

"Bridget," whispered Lady Eva, as they walked on, "I'm so glad it's you. There was another gel, quite a nice gel she was too——"

"I know," said Bridget.

"But I think you're more the type for dear Evelyn."

"I thought," struck in Evelyn, "if we got married pretty quick we might not be too late to spend our honeymoon trout-fishing."

"Wizard," said Bridget. "Funny thing, most girls would run miles to avoid marrying a fisherman, and that's the only sort of husband I want."

"You certainly are well suited," said Lady Eva.

"Couldn't be better," said Bridget.

Upon an astonished world poured out the news of the overwhelming victory. Mr. Peppercorn's prognostications had been correct, and there was hardly anyone else who had sized up the situation so well. His own speeches had by common consent been the most eloquent and telling of the whole electoral campaign, and his majority at Hickleton had been one of the biggest. He was one of the most popular figures in the country. Thais was exulting over the triumph and over the bustle which she had observed round Captain Chutney's room, heralding his departure from the Ministry after his brief occupation, when her telephone rang and she heard the august voice of her former chief.

"That Miss MacNutt. Good morning. Samuel Peppercorn speaking."

"Millions of congratulations, Mr. Peppercorn, if I dare say that here."

"Thank ye, young Thais. Now I want to talk to you particularly. Can you come round to the ladies' rooms at the Tilbury Club? I suppose you can get away?"

"Easily. There's no one at the helm to-day. Chaos is come again."

"Splendid! How long will you be?"

"Ten minutes. I've wound up the Branch, as you know, but I've left the car till the last, and it's still available."

"Grand! Come along."

Some neat and quick work with a comb, a lipstick, and a powder-puff, and Thais was dashing westward. Within ten minutes she was in the discreet little ladies' drawing-room of the Tilbury which had been the *rendezvous* of a good many playboys and modish nymphs in its time.

It was soon after ten o'clock, and Mr. Peppercorn had the room to himself. She had never seen him, except on that Sunday at Carstairs Hall, dressed in anything but the black coat and striped trousers of the commissar, and now, in a delightful grey suit, he looked years younger. He had a carnation in his button-hole and had discarded the black tie of mourning for one with oblique claret-coloured stripes. He was beaming and remarkably good looking. He held out both hands to her.

"Thais!"

"Sam!"

"This is great!"

"It's terrific! It means we can save the whole commissar system from extinction. Are you—I mean, have you——?"

"Yes, Minister of Planning and Controls. Powers practically unlimited. Ramsbotham was a bit peevish."

"Terrific! And have you got Bush House? Yes? Oh, Sam, how marvellous! I wonder if you've got a corner for me."

"Thais, the chief reason I asked you to come was to tell you that I had more than a corner, all I have, in fact, if you would only come and share it."

"Oh, Sam, this is terrific! I hadn't thought—— Yes, I suppose I had, once or twice. But——"

"I know it's asking a lot. Damme, I'm getting an old buffer! Fifty-one next week."

"Dear Sam, you don't look a day more than forty-nine. And I'm nearly thirty myself, with several grey hairs."

"But you haven't given me my answer."

"It's yes, Sam. Of course it's yes. You knew all the time."

Thereupon Thais was folded in the arms of the Minister of Planning and Controls. She emerged from the embrace

for one breath, was drawn into it again, came out gasping a second time, went back again, and finally managed to break away and splutter:

"Sam, you're terrific! But someone might come in."

"Damme, I don't care if all London comes in! Presently we'll go and look for a ring, and then we'll go on to the Creeper for luncheon. I ventured to book a table, in hopes that the answer would be favourable. Was I presuming too much?"

"Of course you weren't, Soapy—I mean Sam."

"That's barred. That's the one thing barred. If you call me that I'll break off the engagement and if you sue me for breach of promise I'll plead that you called me foul names."

"Sorry, Sam."

"Shall I show you how I forgive?" asked Samuel Peppercorn, and proceeded to do so without awaiting her reply. She then told him that his age might have been forty-eight.

"You know, Sam," she said presently, "I can foresee some wonderful opportunities. The P.M. and Ramsbotham are sure to be doing a lot of travelling, so you can wait till they're away and stage something big in the House, with all the limelight on you, which is where it ought to be. You'll steal all the headlines."

"Yes, I might do that. But I tell you what, my dear, I'm going to steal 'em when we announce we're going to get spliced. I tell you what, I'm in a benevolent mood and I'd like to do the kind thing by dear old Shick. He's been very useful, and I'll want a lot out of him when I get him transferred to my new Ministry. Let's tip him the wink an hour or two ahead of anyone else. It'd be jam for the little man."

"Of course, dear Sam. The more people I can please

to-day, the happier I'll be, so long as I please the one who really matters."

"Well if you find it as easy to please other people as you do to please me you'll be the most popular girl in London. The honeymoon will have to be postponed, I'm afraid, because there's such a lot of work on. But the very moment things get quieter we'll pop off to the U.S. on urgent business, and, damme, if urgent business doesn't take us to Florida this winter, call me a Dutchman! Now let's go to Bond Street and have a look for that ring. I suppose you're set on the conventional diamond, but with your hair and eyes I thought a big sapphire——"

Scene: the Virginia Creeper just before lunch-time. Enter Evelyn and Bridget. They are met by the head waiter and conducted to their table. Restaurants always make a fuss over wounded Guards officers, who come into the category of creditable clients. Evelyn and Bridget sit down and look about them. Bridget takes off her gloves. She has a diamond engagement ring.

The commissars come in two by two. There are old commissars and young commissars, fat commissars and thin commissars, attractive commissars and dull commissars, but on the whole these belong to the higher and more interesting order. Among others present are Major Waterson, and friend. Major Waterson was kicked out with ignominy by a hard-hearted Army, but has merely gone across the road to the Ministry of Commerce, where he has been given a job more suited to his high talents than that which he held with the Monobelium Branch. Friend has a brown lamb coat, despite the fact that it is high summer—no, no questions of any kind regarding its origins will be answered; if every woman in London with

a fur coat in this year of the peace had to give a strict account of how she came by it the information would be entertaining, no doubt, but also unseemly, and *ipso facto* is barred from this modest narrative, which would never bring a blush to the cheek of the virgin daughter of the most puritanic of commissars.

There are also a few ex-commissars, if in this country the commissar can ever be described as ex-, quondam, or no longer having the special status. For example, there is Captain Chutney, who has lost not only his Ministry, but also his parliamentary seat. Captain Chutney is with a well-known City man, and if it is not announced within the next few days that Captain Chutney has joined the Board of the Amalgamated Deep Goldfields—which, of course, has as subsidiary Floradora Holdings, which holds fifty-one per cent of the capital of the Amalgamated Deep Goldfields—then the Virginia Creeper will be astonished.

There are even some members of the general public, actors and actresses, publishers, and what-not. Mr. Grossbart, for example, is lunching with Mr. Wellington Boot. And there are Mr. Benny Rosencrantz and Miss Dawn Guildenstern, visiting their old haunt for the first time since they have been liberated. Miss Guildenstern is combing her hair over the dish of hors d'œuvres, observing which Evelyn says firmly to his waiter: "Two clear soups, please."

Still the commissars come in two by two, or more rarely four by four, till nearly all the tables are filled. Then there is a bustle, some whispering and excitement, though Cabinet Ministers are no rareties in the Virginia Creeper. Enter Mr. Peppercorn and Thais. They are shown to their table with even more *empressement* than Evelyn and Bridget. They are commissars of the highest order. Thais takes off her gloves. She has a sapphire engagement ring—

quick work—the sapphire being about four times the size of Bridget’s diamond. They look about them. They espy Evelyn and Bridget, and gallantly, knowing him to be a cripple, they get up and cross to his table.

The two girls, the only members of the quartette who do not know each other, are introduced. They eye each other smilingly, but neither missing a detail. Bridget thinks that Thais may go to fat in a few years. Thais thinks there is a hint of bad temper and disdain in the face of Bridget. They murmur, “Congratulations!” Thais and Evelyn shake hands heartily and wish each other all the best of luck, and Thais murmurs: “I’m so glad, Evelyn. May you be very happy.” They separate and sit down to eat the best that the Creeper can produce, which is a good deal better than most restaurants can produce in these days. Each couple toasts its own future in a gin and imitation-French, and then the two girls amicably raise their glasses and look towards each other across the restaurant.

“Sam,” says Thais, “I feel so happy! I’d like to dance. Do you dance, by the way? I forgot to ask.”

“I was considered the second-best dancer in Surbiton.”

“Gosh, Sam, you really are terrific! Yes, of course we’ll have a bottle.”

“Evelyn,” says Bridget, “I’ve got some lovely pre-war trout-flies. Do you know, I feel nearer to being happy than I’ve ever done in my life. Isn’t it absurd? Of course I’d never admit to anyone but you, but I do. Yes, I vote we prang a bottle, whatever it costs.”

The last of the commissars have come in and taken their seats.

In his office sits Mr. Shick. He has taken off his coat,

as he always does in moments of excitement. He rings up Mr. Mosenthal's paper and asks for Mr. Mosenthal.

"Big news, Mose! The biggest you can imagine."

"What, Japan made peace?" asks Mr. Mosenthal.

"No, bigger than that. And if you take it now you can have it exclusive for an edition. The old man's marrying that girl Thais!"

"Hey, what you talking about, Mr. Shick? What ole man? Not Peppercorn? Will you cross your fingers and say strike-me-dead-if-I'm-a-liar?"

"Strike-me-dead-if-I'm-a-liar! And I'm crossing them, I'm crossing them like hell, I am."

"You've sure said a mouthful, Mr. Shick. . Wait a minute."

Mr. Mosenthal took off his coat, and felt better.

"Yep, that's a story, a real story. Banner head-line. 'Peppercorn to wed beautiful Civil Servant!' How would that do?" (Mr. Mosenthal wrote it in bold capitals on a pad to see how it would do). "No, I can do better'n that. Well, thanks a lot, Mr. Shick. Any details?"

"No, but you know all the background. Go ahead and good luck to you. Oh, one sec. Have you read the social stuff in your *Jupiter* to-day?"

"Nope."

"Got it by you? There's something that might make a par."

"Yep. No, I can't find the blamed thing. I'll send for a copy."

"No, don't bother. It won't take a second to read. Here it is:

"The engagement is announced and the marriage will shortly take place between Lieutenant Evelyn Carstairs Allardyce, C.B.E., Border Guards, only son

of the late Richard Thomas Allardyce and of Mrs. Allardyce, of 21 Trumpington Court, St. John's Wood, and Bridget Denise, eldest daughter of Mr. Herbert Livingstone, K.C., and Mrs. Livingstone, of 21 Black Street, W.1., and the Old Lodge, Hertfield, Sussex.' "

"Yep. I got it. Thanks a lot again, Mr. Shick. Thanks seversmutch. But I'm not sure that's news. I'll think it over, but I'm somehow jes' not quite sure that that's a big story as things go to-day. But the other one's the best I seen this long while. Oh, boy, I'm going to make one hell of a splash about Soapy an' Thais! I'll make this burg sit up an' take note or my name's not Ikey Mosen-thal. Mr. Shick, you're a reel friend. Thank you, Mr. Shick. Good-bye."

Boxing Day, 1945.

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